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FUTURE
ISSUE 340



2010 - 2020

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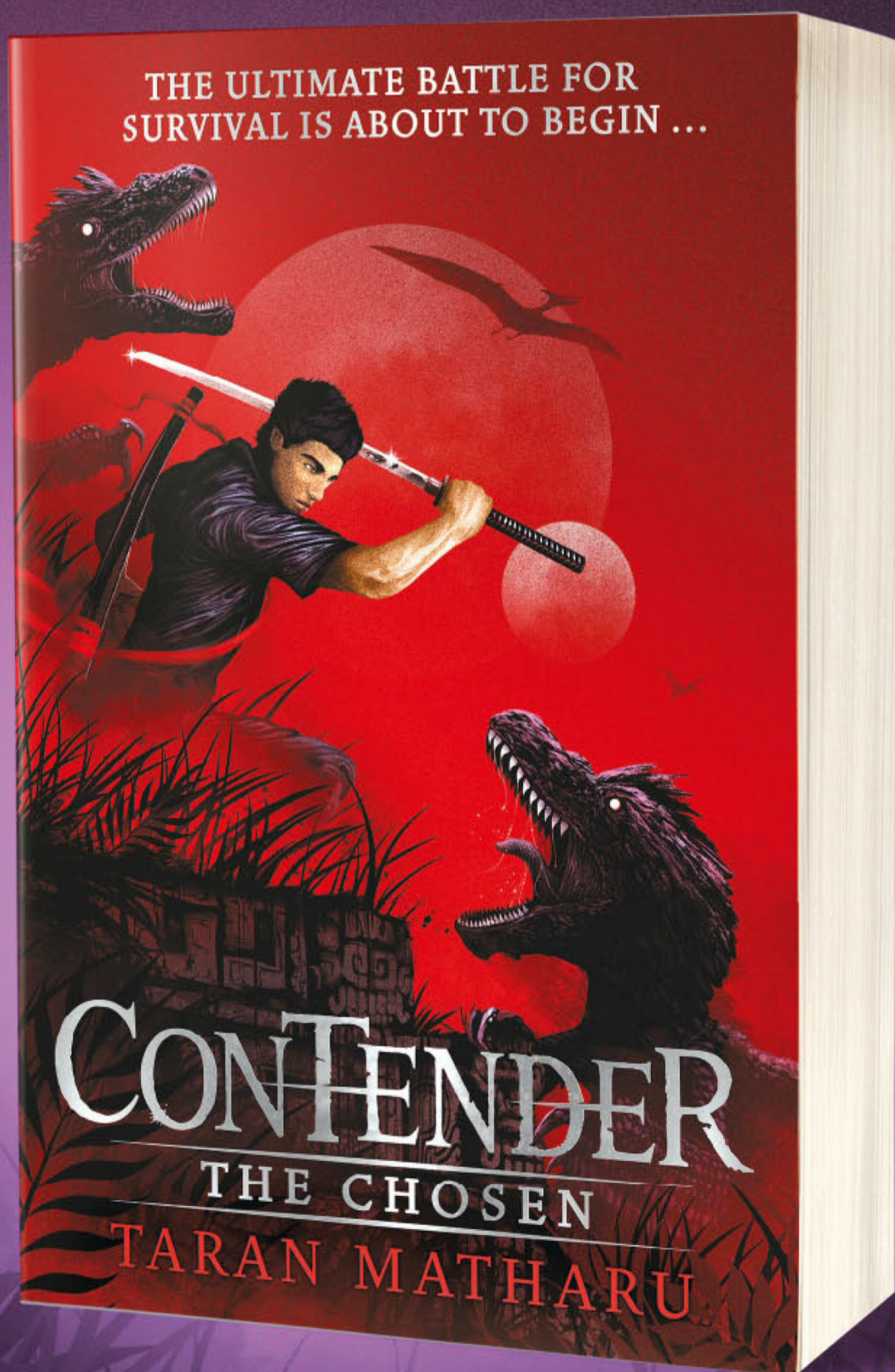
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“HAVE WE LEARNED FROM OUR TRIUMPHS AND MISTAKES?”



It was only when we began our research for this issue that I realised what an eventful decade it's been. Within ten short years, our relationships with crowdfunding, esports, microtransactions, open development, and more have all fundamentally changed.

Are things better now, or worse? Have we learned from our triumphs and mistakes?

Does the future look bright or bleak? Perhaps, over the course of our feature, you'll come to your own conclusions.

All I know is, at the start of the decade I was working in a carpet shop, and now I'm the editor of the world's greatest PC gaming magazine. Like I say, it's been eventful.

ROBIN VALENTINE
MANAGING EDITOR
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

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Xmas offer!
SEE p58

The PC Gamer team



FRASER BROWN
Specialist in
Travelling through
Valve time

Twitter
[@FraserIBrown](https://twitter.com/FraserIBrown)

This month
Got to say "Valve is making a new *Half-Life*" with a straight face.



WES FENLON
Specialist in
Arcade rituals

Twitter
[@wesleyfenlon](https://twitter.com/wesleyfenlon)

This month
Decided to introduce us to the world's most satanic pinball table. Evil exists, and it has ramps.



PHIL SAVAGE
Specialist in
Australian weaponry

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[@Octaeder](https://twitter.com/Octaeder)

This month
Despite looming online deadlines, made time to tell you all about his magical boomerang.



RACHEL WATTS
Specialist in
Rude acronyms

Twitter
[@rachel_watts](https://twitter.com/rachel_watts)

This month
The creators of *GTFO* taught our newest writer the value of teamwork. Also, monsters.

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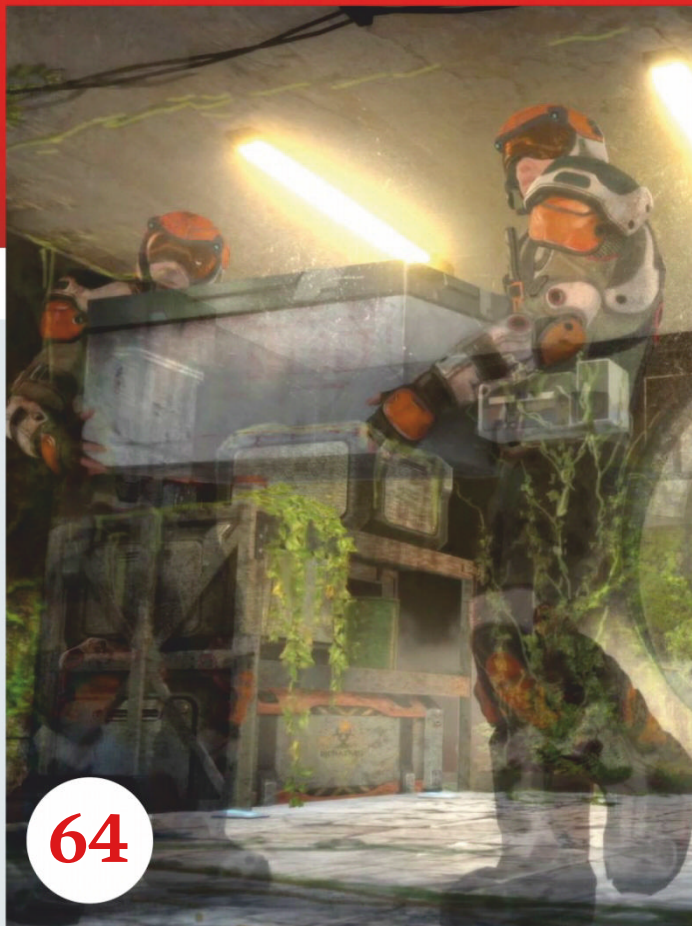
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Alyx and her dad are trying to cause trouble for the Combine.

THE NUCLEAR OPTION

HALF-LIFE: ALYX is Valve's largest ever project, and it's just the start

After leaving us hanging for years and driving the internet into an endless conspiratorial frenzy, Valve's finally returning to the world of Gordon Freeman, though we won't be playing the bespectacled physicist this time. Instead, *Half-Life: Alyx* is a virtual reality spin-off set between *Half-Life* and *Half-Life 2*, with the much chattier Alyx Vance stepping into the spotlight as she fights the Combine. Though a VR exclusive, Valve says it's still a full *Half-Life* game, and it's not the only one the team wants to make.

"*Half-Life: Alyx* is the largest game team we've had yet," Valve designer Greg Coomer tells us. "About a third of the people on the project have worked on previous *Half-Life* games, some all the way back to the first *Half-Life*." As well as boasting the developer's largest team, *Alyx* will be

INSTEAD OF A GRAVITY GUN, HOWEVER, THERE ARE GRAVITY GLOVES

a lot longer than a typical VR game, clocking in at around 15-20 hours. Despite the change in protagonist and switch to VR, it still sounds familiar: a mix of shooting and puzzles, returning pals like the ominous G-Man and adorable headcrabs, and plenty of physics wizardry. Instead of a gravity gun, however, there are gravity gloves. It's also once again set in City 17, which should look a lot like how you remember it, judging by the screenshots, even though it's had a modern makeover.

While it's set before the events of *Half-Life 2*, it will still apparently move the story forward, and the

GTA OFFLINE

FREE GUY



Ryan Reynolds stars in a movie where he plays a bystander NPC in an ersatz *GTA Online*, who goes rogue after killing a player. It's a fun premise, but I'm still not sure I trust Hollywood to represent gaming on screen, and the latter half of the trailer starts to look a bit Ready Player One. ■RV

GOD OF BRICKS

HOLY MINECRAFT



Catholic priest and former tech blogger Father Robert Ballecer asked his Twitter followers which game he should "spin up a server" for in the Vatican. *Minecraft* won the vote, but a few days later the server went down after being pummelled by numerous DDOS attacks. ■AK

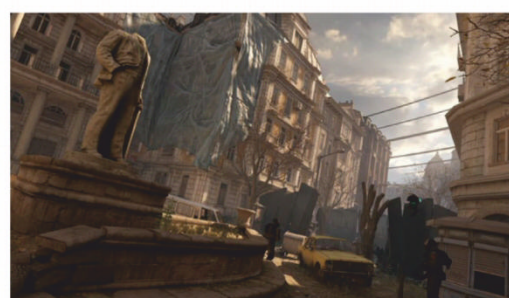
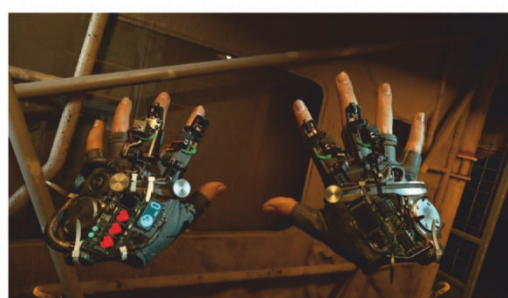
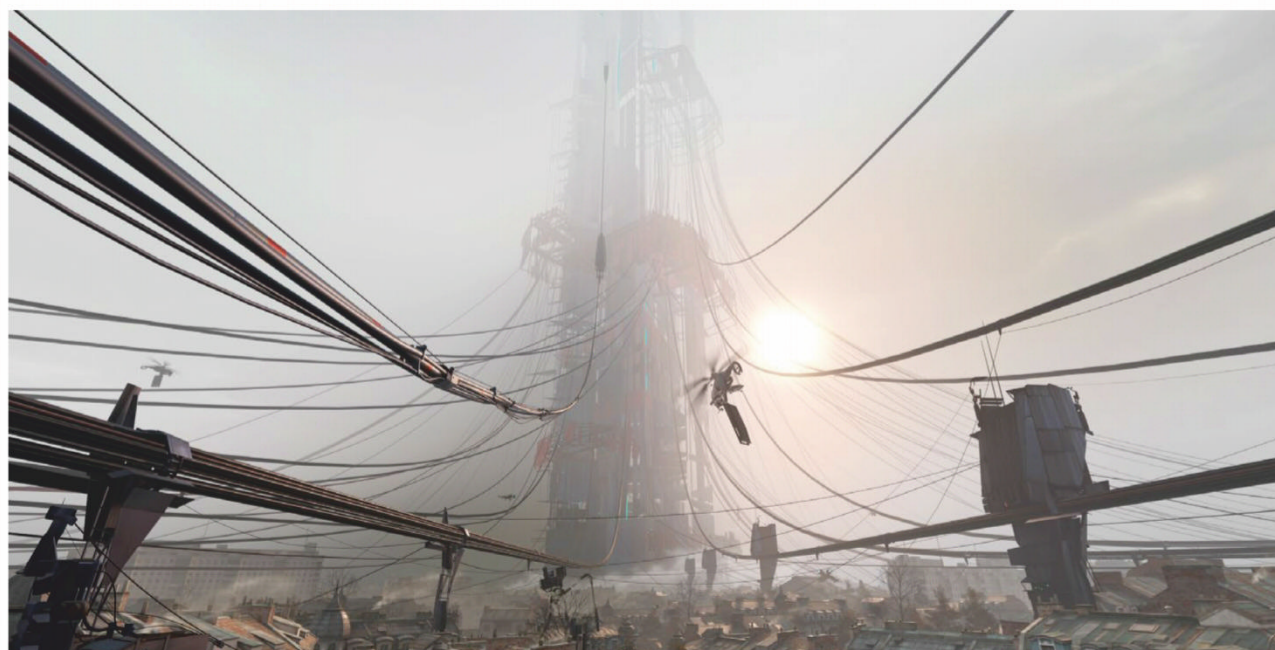


GALAXY BRAIN

GOG GALAXY 2.0



The new version of the GOG Galaxy launcher is now available in open beta. This one's trick is that it can collect up all of your games and friends lists into a single place. There's room for improvement right now, but it is nice to having everything that I own collected into a single, sortable library. ■PS



ABOVE, TOP: Tidy up your cables!

ABOVE, BOTTOM: These spooky, disembodied Borg hands are your gravity gloves.

appearance of the G-Man suggests big things are afoot. But that still leaves us wondering what the heck happens to everyone after *Half-Life 2: Episode 2*. Former Valve writer Marc Laidlaw posted a synopsis of his version of *Episode 3*, but if we ever get a conclusion, expect it to be pretty different, as he left in 2016.

HALF-LIFE 3 (NOT QUITE) CONFIRMED!

The good news (everyone!) is that Valve is seemingly excited about *Half-Life* again and the development team doesn't just want to stop at *Alyx*.

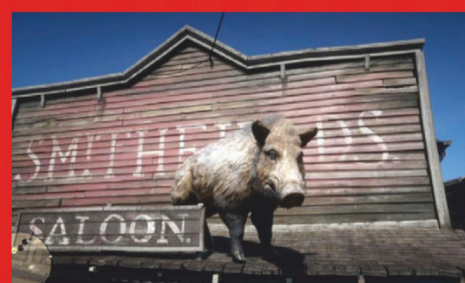
In an interview with *The Verge*, designer David Speyer has confirmed that this is a full return to the series, and that a lot had been learned from designing *Alyx*, which could also be applied to future games in the series.

"In the process of creating *Half-Life: Alyx*, we've had to explore new ways to tell stories with these characters and this world, and we've discovered a lot of new gameplay experiences that go beyond what we've been able to do before. Of course, we'll have to wait and see how people react to *Half-Life: Alyx* once it's out, but we'd love to continue pushing forward."

Half-Life: Alyx is due out in March 2020 for PC VR headsets, and you'll get it for free if you own an Index.

Fraser Brown

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

BioShock

2K has finally announced that a new *BioShock* is in development, but it's still several years away.

Red Dead Redemption 2

RDR 2 already has a huge modding scene on PC – check out our list of the best at bit.ly/2t69ceo.

Halo

Halo has finally returned to PC, where it nabbed the third and top spots on Steam.

In the Valley of Gods

The creators of *Firewatch* have shelved their intriguing archeological adventure to work on different things at Valve, including *Half-Life: Alyx*.

Steam controller

Valve's Steam Controller is no more, with the last of the stock now sold.

Rocket League

The loot box system has been replaced with a pricey shop, which players are even less happy with.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy was all set to come storming into this page with a classic intro; a real barnburner of an opening statement that would have at once undermined and reinforced the idea of dividing time into distinct ten-year chunks. By the end – after a brief detour to talk about how a French website

The Spy has never heard of is claiming that a sequel to *A Plague Tale: Innocence* will be released in 2022 – The Spy would have deftly circled back around to spin a conclusion that nonetheless reprised a few key themes into an unexpected message of hope.

And sure, you'd have chuckled and moved on – there's an article about pinball over the page – but then, in a quiet, unexpected moment, The Spy's words would return to linger briefly on your mind. And, unbeknown to you, The Spy would harvest that attention into a sort of metaphysical fuel. This is the dark ritual that allows a magazine rumour column to survive into the third decade of the 21st century.

Unfortunately, The Spy made the mistake of reading all the comments and replies to the various game-of-the-decade round-up lists posted over the last month, and – frankly – there are bigger issues to deal with right now. You see, whenever an outlet starts

talking about the end of the decade, somebody will, without fail, appear with a “well, actually” of fedoran magnitude. The claim is this: “Well, actually, the new decade doesn't start until 2021”.

If this is to be believed, then the first year of the '90s was not in fact 1990. Which, given that Pearl Jam didn't release *Ten* until 1991, might not be as ridiculous as it initially sounds. The reason for the claim – and a blatantly SEO-tailored article published by *Farmers' Almanac* agrees – is that, because there was never a year 0 AD, all decades should be measured from the year 1 AD. If you're nodding along to this reasoning, The Spy would advise you to knock it off. Despite the historical context, the whole thing is absurd.

The 1 AD explanation would only apply if we used ordinal numbering when measuring decades. Clearly we don't, though, as we refer to each ten-year period by a specific prefix. The '80s, for example, can only ever refer to the years 1980 through 1989, because – and The Spy despairs that this even needs explaining – they are the ones with the eight in them. To put it another way, the whole thing only works because society believes in it too hard, much like the economy or *Ninja's* fame. And just like both of those things, it can change, too.

CRACKING NEW DECADE

On an unrelated note, The Spy can't find a single source for the *Plague Tale 2* rumour outside of the aforementioned French site *XboxSquad*, who themselves do not show their working.

“Aha, The Spy,” you realise, “I have caught you in a trap of your own making. You referenced the 21st century in the second paragraph. That is an ordinal numbering system. And so when you say this column will survive into the third decade of that century, that can only mean the year 2021. Your petard! It hoists you!” (At this point you should imagine The Spy doing a pirouette to camera, face full of amusement and affection.) That's right, dear reader. Here's to at least another year of this. Have a good 2020. Spy out. ■
The Spy

TO PUT IT ANOTHER WAY, THE WHOLE THING ONLY WORKS BECAUSE SOCIETY BELIEVES IN IT



THE SPY

The Spy plans to recreate the roaring '20s by screaming continuously for the next ten years.

This month in... 2010



1 That we had the world's first *BioShock 2* review tells us either that the tide had turned for PC gaming's late-2000s dark period and that publishers were actively trying to court PC fans and their Steam-powered money, or that we just got lucky with the on-sale dates. Either way, Graham gave it a hearty 90 per cent score. We love us a big drill.

ISSUE
210, February 2010
ON THE COVER
BioShock 2
IN CINEMAS
The Book of Eli

2 In this issue's Special Report, we had Adam Oxford predicting that Intel's new combined CPUs would kill the graphics card.



3 Richard Cobbett tracks down a host of PC gaming firsts, from the first easter egg (a writer's name hidden in Atari's *Adventure*), to the first 18-rated game (cyberpunk vampire game *Bloodnet*). As for the first time Richard Cobbett wrote for PC Gamer, thanks to a series of archival mishaps that information has been lost to time.



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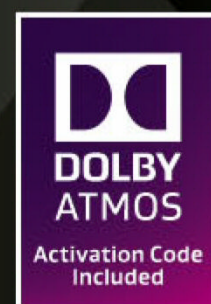
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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

Land your ball in Lilith's head basket to get things rolling.

PINBALL WARLOCK

How the wild flipper action of **DEMON'S TILT** evolved in Early Access

Demon's *Tilt* didn't have bowling, at first. It had a chimera, sure, and an occult priestess whose eyes glowed a blazing pink when she hurled your pinball in a circle around her head. It had a pentagram (actually, several pentagrams), and pulsing rings of bullets that pummelled your ball as you battled your way upward from the bottom of the table. Hard to imagine what else a game promising Occult Pinball Action could need, really, but *Demon's Tilt* creator Adam Ferrando had time on his hands. After launching *Demon's Tilt* in Steam Early Access last January, he set to work squashing bugs and then figuring out how to expand a pinball game. Why not a bowling minigame?

It's ridiculous enough to feel perfectly in line with *Demon's Tilt*'s aesthetic, full of skeletons, homunculi and heavy metal schlock. It's heavily inspired by the '90s Japanese 'Crush' pinball games, most famously *Devil's Crush* for the TurboGrafx-16. *Devil's Crush* was a similar three-screen-tall pinball table crawling with fantasy monsters to slay, but beyond those basic common elements, it was a game that made people go 'what the hell?' when they first came across it.

"My relationship with the *Turbo Crush* games is like the hidden gem thing," Ferrando says. "Nothing beats

finding something so weird. That's what I wanted to put into [*Demon's Tilt*]: giving you something so weird you didn't know you wanted, and it finding a cult audience."

Making a pinball game, though, was more of a practical decision than a lifelong dream. Ferrando is an artist and comes from a background in the toy industry. He's never made a videogame. Pinball, blessedly, requires no AI programming, and the programming it does involve revolves around some simple mechanics. Gravity, flippers, and switches. "It's 90 per cent design, and everything else is relatively simple," he says.

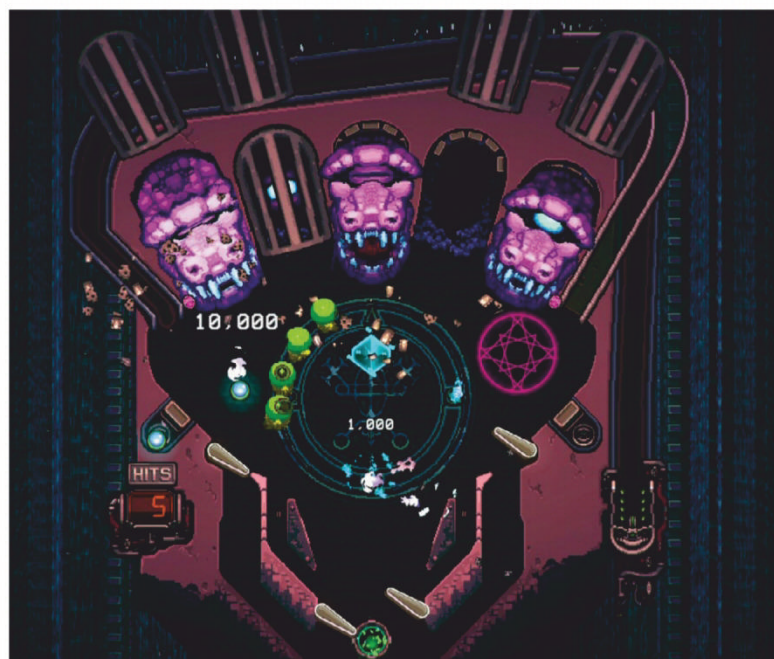
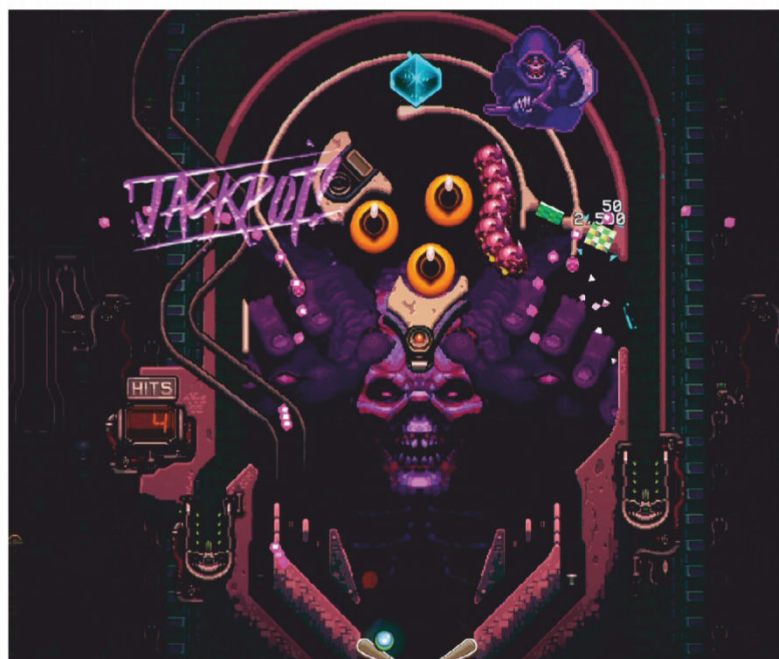
Demon's Tilt felt unusually fully-formed when it launched into Early Access, but that's kind of the nature of a pinball table. You can't easily add new weapons or enemies or levels. The table itself needed to be mostly complete, and fun to play. As he was designing it, Ferrando decided a key part of the experience was full-table multiball – meaning when players fulfil a certain objective and launch a multiball frenzy, the entire playfield would be fair game. That meant *Demon's Tilt* couldn't be carved up into multiple smaller sub-tables or progress from one screen to another; it also meant that the table itself had to, essentially, be finished.

"I forced myself to put a lot of content into the main table before tackling sub-tables," he says. "I didn't know if we were going to get to do them. We thought, we want to



More 'tables'

Most pinball games play it straight, emulating the design of real physical pinball. But recently indie devs have done entirely new things with basic pinball mechanics. *Yoku's Island Express* is part pinball, part *Metroid*. And *Creature in the Well* is a hack 'n' slash with dungeons built like pinball tables.



FAR LEFT: There are sub-tables found in EX mode.

LEFT: It gets kind of like *Gator Panic* at some points.

FACES OF EVIL *Smash these occult figures with your ball for big points*



LILITH THE PRIESTESS
The centrepiece of the table. When her eyes start to bleed, you know things are heating up.



THE CHIMERA
The Chimera guards an ultra jackpot and the ball lock, key to triggering multiball.



HOMUNCULI
Man, this thing is just gross. So fling your balls at its many faces... that also sounds gross.



CTHULAMARI
Can't have the occult without Cthulhu, right? He spews attacks like he's in a bullet hell shmup.

come out content-complete, so the game needs to stand on its own without these extras. So really the extras we added were giving people more of what they liked. I wanted the main experience to stand on its own."

THE DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

The final version of *Demon's Tilt* adds three sub-tables, which remind me of some of the coolest pinball tables I've played, where you can launch the ball onto a small mini table above the playfield. *Demon's Tilt's* are all inspired by different arcade games, including the classic *Gator Panic* – you know, the one where you smash a bunch of plastic gators with an oversized foam mallet. The bowling sub-table is delightfully thorough, with a legit custom UI for spares and strikes and frames, and a lane that trades pins for tombstones and a giant skull backdrop.

"One thing I didn't expect was for people to like the original balance," Ferrando says. "But since people liked the vanilla game so much, there's now an EX mode.

"I just made EX mode a little bit harder, and have deeper rules. People can always play the original vanilla version, and EX has the new sub-tables and a new final boss, and there's the bowling sub-game. That was all produced in Early Access."

Getting the feel of everything in *Demon's Tilt* just right was less of a science and more pressing play a hundred times a day. It's not realistic, like digital games that try to simulate physical pinball. It's designed to feel good first

and foremost, which means little touches, like balls never losing momentum halfway up ramps and then plummeting back down. For a first game, *Demon's Tilt* required surprisingly little redesigning in Early Access. Ferrando and his publisher Ralph Barbagallo scrambled to release a few quick patches fixing collision issues, and added a 'ball stuck' mechanic that they say is now redundant, after a year of further tweaking.

The biggest benefit of Early Access proved to be the positive reviews of its small fanbase. "I went and asked people I know that are smarter than me what to expect from launching a game, but nobody had launched a pinball game," Barbagallo laughs. "So I was pleased. People liked it. The reviews were good. One of the biggest challenges we had with this game in general was that people would be like 'oh, it's just pinball'. But we're like, well it's not really

"I JUST MADE EX MODE A LITTLE BIT HARDER, AND HAVE DEEPER RULES"

just pinball. It's more than that. We had a hard time getting traction with festivals, things like that, before the game was out. The perception was just 'I'll buy a table for £2.99 in one of these pinball games'. But it's more than that, it's a whole game. Once reviews started coming out, it found this audience of people that got it. I guess it's a little on the nose, but it got the ball rolling, so to speak."

Since releasing the *Catacombs* update in July, which added the sub-tables, they've spent months optimising the code and working on a port for Xbox, which launched in December, and is devilishly good fun. ■

Wes Fenlon

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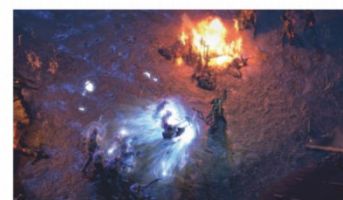
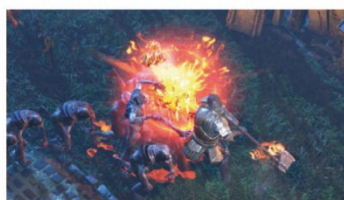


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NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2021DEVELOPER
Grinding Gear GamesPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
pathofexile2.com

PATH OF EXILE 2

Path of Exile gets a major overhaul with this free, upcoming campaign

When *Path of Exile* creator Chris Wilson took the stage during ExileCon in November, I didn't expect him to announce *Path of Exile 2*, a whole new campaign that overhauls most core systems and upgrades graphics. No extra costs, no divided playerbase, and every core expansion from the original will be re-integrated into the new one.

And after playing 45 minutes of the game, I can't overstate how much it feels like a true sequel, despite technically still being the same game. It's an improvement over the original in nearly every way, and its smart refinement of its skill system makes *Path of Exile*'s daunting complexity a lot more accessible – all without sacrificing an inch of depth. If anything, *Path of Exile 2* is going to become even more of a theory crafter's dream come true.

RETURN TO WRAECLAST

Set 20 years after the events of the original campaign, *Path of Exile 2* is the story of a society trying to rebuild after the original cast of player characters killed every single god in existence and used their power to murder an even bigger god. Now every deity is dead and humankind is left to clean up the corpses (there are a lot) and try and move forward.

Path of Exile 2, Wilson tells me, is Grinding Gear Games' chance to press the reset button and tell a smaller-scale story that isn't about world-ending threats. You play as an entirely new exile who narrowly escapes their execution and washes up on the shores of Wraeclast again. Though it wasn't immediately clear from the early quests I completed, your goal is to investigate the duke who sentenced you to die and the paranormal mysteries that surround him. Like the original campaign, that means clicking on enemies until they

explode and good loot falls out of their dismembered corpses.

Even in the first minutes of this adventure, *Path of Exile 2* feels like a big improvement over the original. The original three acts of *Path of Exile* are now seven years old and their age is shown most in how one-dimensional much of boss fights are. More often than not, you're standing in place clicking on a big monster until it stops moving. And after beating those bosses dozens of times, the lack of challenge is grating. *Path of Exile 2*'s bosses clearly benefit from years of figuring out what makes boss fights fun.

One early quest tasked me with killing The Devourer, a monstrous worm living in an underground passage. *Path of Exile*'s first bosses are usually pretty simple but The Devourer was a surprising challenge. During the battle it would frequently tunnel underground and explode, forcing me to run for my life or die. But I had to be careful, because each time its head moved it would leave behind a pool of acid that I had to avoid, slowly reducing the space I had to manoeuvre, and its deadly tail would crush me if I ventured too close. Meanwhile, the worm's head constantly fired acid projectiles or tried to dismember me with one of its large mandibles. It was hectic and overwhelming – exactly what I love about action-RPGs.

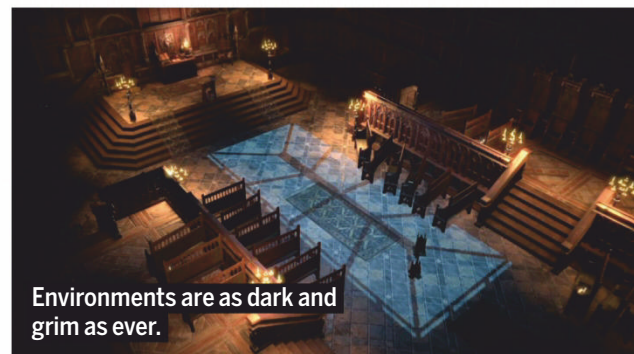
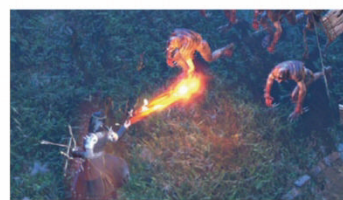
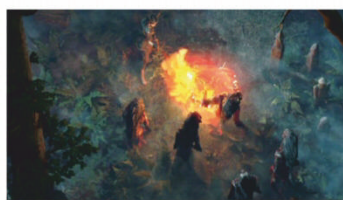
Each of the bosses I fought were exceptionally good at keeping me on my toes and fighting for my life. In a later zone, The Rust King pelted me with jagged bits of metal. If I got nicked even a little bit, I could quickly bleed out. It forced me to pay careful attention to his movement so I knew what type of attack to expect and could prepare. If he levitated a swarm of knives, I had better run to his flanks. If I spent too long hacking away at his ankles, he'd trigger an explosion that would kill me if I didn't step back.

That high-stakes combat trickles down to regular packs of enemies. Contorted witches spawn occult symbols that explode seconds later, while hulking

PLAYED
IT

THAT HIGH-STAKES COMBAT TRICKLES DOWN TO REGULAR PACKS OF ENEMIES

Path of Exile 2



➤ ghouls slam stone slabs into the ground, sending shockwaves in my direction. I still slaughtered hordes of imps, skeletons, and slimy bugs with reckless abandon, but I also felt far more aware of how they could, in turn, slaughter me.

IMPROVED GRAPHICS

Path of Exile 2's combat benefits greatly from an improved graphics engine as well. Environments in the original were great, but better lighting and particle effects enhance the creepiness and danger of some areas. A zone called Grimtangle is a dark and colourless knot of gnarled branches that would be boring to look at if it weren't for the searing glow of yellow fungi found on the floor. These aren't just pretty to look at, though – venture too close and they'll explode, coating you in acid. What's worse is the zone is full of infected zombies with a special attack that coats the ground in more fungi, forcing me to always be on the move.

One of the cooler features of the new graphics is that arrows are now physical objects that will stick into or bounce off surfaces depending on their material. Though I've never cared for *Path of Exile*'s bows, I now want to use one just so I can coat every level in arrows. It's subtle, but it gives the combat an extra jolt.

More demanding combat means players will also have to make smarter use of skill gems. Fortunately, this is another area where the game is significantly improved. The skill system in *Path of Exile* is enormously complicated, but the gist of it is that abilities aren't automatically learned depending on your class. Instead, every ability is a skill gem that can be looted or received as a quest reward and must be socketed into your gear before you can actually use it. If you allocate your stats right, there's nothing to stop a Ranger from throwing fireballs or wielding a two-handed mace and ground-slamming the life out of everything.

Things get more complicated when you start getting gear with linked sockets, letting you equip support gems that augment how your main skill functions. You could cast fireball yourself, or you can socket it with a Spell Totem support gem and summon



a stationary totem that fires off an endless stream of fireballs for you. It's a great idea hindered by an unintuitive interface that makes managing and understanding skills troublesome. It's possible to socket skills together that don't actually synergise – and it's not made clear when they don't. But the new system coming in *Path of Exile 2* fixes most of these problems while adding even more ways to tinker and build ridiculously powerful monster slayers.

With the new system, armour no longer has randomised sockets, so players don't have to swap skill gems every single time they equip a new piece of gear. Now, each armour type has a set capacity for skill gems, with the skill gems themselves having the actual sockets for support gems. This is all managed in a new inventory menu that makes it much easier to understand how the two interact. With the new system, you can't socket gems that don't work together.

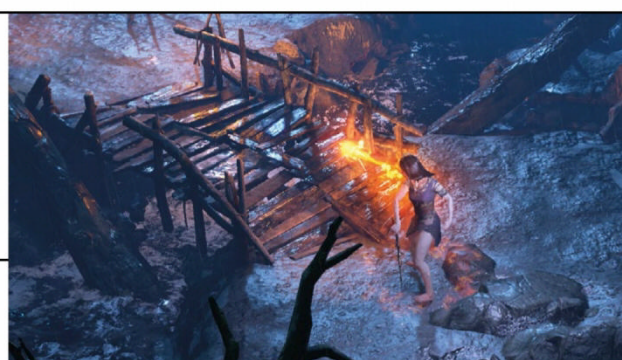
The other exciting feature of this new system is that it's now possible to have more six-linked skill gems. It's hard to explain why this is awesome without diving into a 40-minute lecture on *Path of Exile* theorycrafting, but the current maximum amount of linked sockets is six, which is extremely rare but creates an astronomically powerful skill. The current system is limited, though, because only a player's chest armour and two-handed weapons are capable of having six sockets. With the new system, any skill gem can have six sockets, so players will now have the possibility of having several six-linked skills rather than just two.

This is in addition to an entire overhaul of equipment. One of the more contentious parts of *Path of Exile* is that most of the regular equipment looks terrible, with all the coolest cosmetic sets locked behind microtransactions. But Grinding Gear Games is designing dozens of new weapons and armours for players to find that also make use of the new physics and graphics engine.

From my time playing through its first act, it's clear that *Path of Exile 2* is a major improvement over an already great game. The new graphics and more demanding combat is a lot of fun, but the reworked skill system goes a long way in sanding down those few remaining jagged edges. And because this isn't a separate sequel, the original campaign will get access to the same core improvements – everything except the better designed bosses and enemies, that is.

Steven Messner

BETTER LIGHTING AND PARTICLE EFFECTS ENHANCE THE CREEPINESS AND DANGER



PREVIEW

Zombie Army 4: Dead War

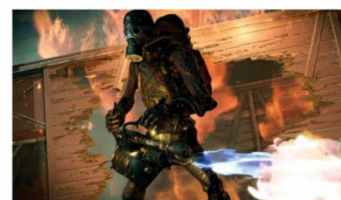
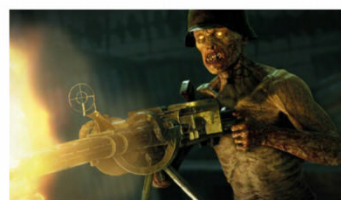
You can stomp or shoot downed zombies to make sure they don't get back up.



Armoured enemies don't require a particularly nuanced approach, just extra blasting.



Zombie Army 4: Dead War



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Feb 4, 2020

DEVELOPER
Rebellion Developments

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
zombiearmy.com

ZOMBIE ARMY 4: DEAD WAR

The *Sniper Elite* spinoff rises once again

Zombies and sniper rifles – it's a winning combination. With the shambling undead, you get an enemy that can only be eliminated by removing the head or destroying the brain, and who are iconic for shambling very slowly towards you out of the middle distance. In other words, nature's most perfect headshot target.

This pairing has proved especially profitable for Rebellion Developments, the British studio with its fingers in all manner of pies, from comics to films of those comics, but probably best known for producing the *Sniper Elite* games. The first *Zombie Army* started life (or at least undeath) as a spin-off from that series, and found success pretty much immediately. "It made its money back overnight," says Ryan Baker, lead designer of *Zombie Army 4: Dead War* – which is how we end up here, with the first standalone release of entirely new sniper-on-zombie action.

Nearly seven years on, the series has stuck closely to the formula established in that first expansion: keeping *Sniper Elite*'s gruesomely anatomically-correct headshot killcams but switching out the Nazis for zombies. Nazi zombies, in fact – the rare double-baddie, meaning you can feel guilt-free about cheering a slow-motion reply of your bullet blowing out the back of their skull and spreading squishy braaaains all over the level.

"We've gone for the real classic zombies – the slow, shambling, dragging-

their-leg-behind-them sort of zombie, in that classic Romero style," Baker says. "They're not particularly scary when you see one, two, three of them... but in a horde, they suddenly become quite overpowering, and you can quickly find yourself backed into a corner with low ammo and realising, actually, these guys are gonna rip me apart."

SHOOT THEM IN THE HEAD

Luckily, though, you can recruit a horde of your own. Every part of *Dead War*, from its multi-part campaign to the obligatory Horde mode, is built for four-player co-op, which pushes the experience in a slightly different direction. "When you're playing solo, you've not got that backup of other people there to watch your back or revive you when you've been knocked down, so it becomes much more of a horror game," says Baker. With friends, though the number and toughness of zombies might scale up, you're unlikely to feel truly overwhelmed. "You're a bit more relaxed, you'll take more risks, because you know, if I get close to punch somebody and it goes a bit wrong, then Dave over there is going to come and help me back up."

This might undermine the fantasy a little – there's not much reason to carefully line up a shot when a teammate might just rush in and shotgun your target into gibs – but it does make for an excellent hangout game.

But like any hangout spot, *Dead War* needs something to keep bringing you and your crew back to it. Which is where this sequel's biggest change comes in: a sprawling progression system, with a hundred ranks to rise through, each with an accompanying unlock. There's all the stuff you'd expect to see but also modifications for guns and grenades which add elemental damage or other effects. Even the humble medkit can be modded to work in three different ways.

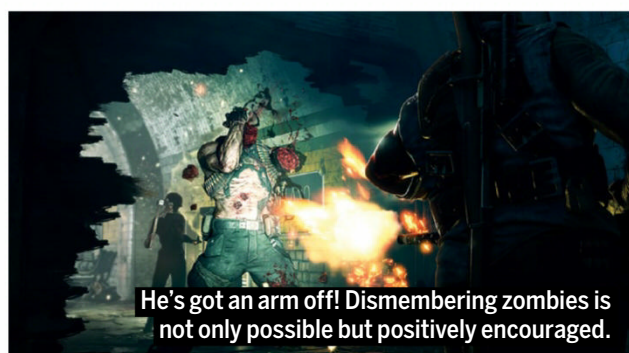
It's all intended to provide a constant dripfeed of content for players, something that will be supported with the release of free Horde maps after launch. That's the hook, long-term, but the one I keep coming back to is much more short-term: lining up a zombie's head in your rifle sights and making it explode from a long way away. It feels good every single time.

Alex Spencer

PLAYED
IT



Sniper Elite's trademark X-ray splat-o vision is back and gorier than ever.



He's got an arm off! Dismembering zombies is not only possible but positively encouraged.

THE FIRST STANDALONE RELEASE OF ENTIRELY NEW SNIPER-ON-ZOMBIE ACTION

Boomerang X

Take on waves of monsters with your magical boomerang.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2020

DEVELOPER
BANG!

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
boomerang-x.com

BOOMERANG X

Fling yourself through the air in this unique first-person thrower

Yes, there is a boomerang. And yes, it's in the shape of an X. In that sense *Boomerang X* satisfies the promise of its name. But having a weapon that comes back to you isn't the most interesting part of this first-person arena... er, shooter? Thrower? Flinger?

PLAYED
IT

The key to *Boomerang X* isn't that the weapon comes back to you. It's that you can go to the weapon. Throw out the boomerang and left-click before it returns and you'll be hurled towards it, gaining a huge burst of speed and propelling yourself off the ground. Do it twice in the air and you can extend your burst jump to cross vast chasms. Do it continuously – turning as needed to change the direction of your next throw, thus shifting your direction of travel – and you can indefinitely fly above arenas.

This is just one of a handful of interactions designed to turn your boomerang into an agent of frenetic

combat. You can also right-click to make the boomerang immediately return to your hand, or hold left-click to charge your throw – letting you snipe enemies from further out. If you do this in mid-air, time will slow, giving you the space to line up an aerial attack with relative ease. Doing so drains an energy bar that can only be filled by killing the various gribbly shadow monsters that you fight. In the most challenging combat rooms, it leads to a very specific pace of battle – desperate and opportunistic, but with moments of precision and grace.

Each of the arenas that I've encountered so far is comprised of three waves full of monsters, but you only ever need to kill a specific handful – marked by yellow dots above their heads.

DESPERATE AND OPPORTUNISTIC, BUT WITH MOMENTS OF PRECISION AND GRACE

Nevertheless, it's helpful to thin out the herd, and not just to charge your energy bar. It's easy to be overrun, and you die in a single hit – at least until you unlock a shield a few arenas in. Standing still is rarely a viable tactic. In the last few arenas that I reached in the demo, I found myself flying around the map purely as a way to outrun the monsters – some of whom can fly – buying myself a little more time to plan out my next attack.

X MARKS THE SPOT

I'm not sure there's much more to *Boomerang X* than its procession of arenas and increasingly challenging fights, but I don't think there really needs to be. Even just based on the small progress I've made, it's a game that feels built around getting the most out of its magical weapon and how its powers combine. So far, each arena has offered a new gimmick that makes for a more interesting fight. It's an in-depth exploration of the possibility space offered by a single tool, and with a traversal system that makes combat feel fast and distinct.

Phil Savage

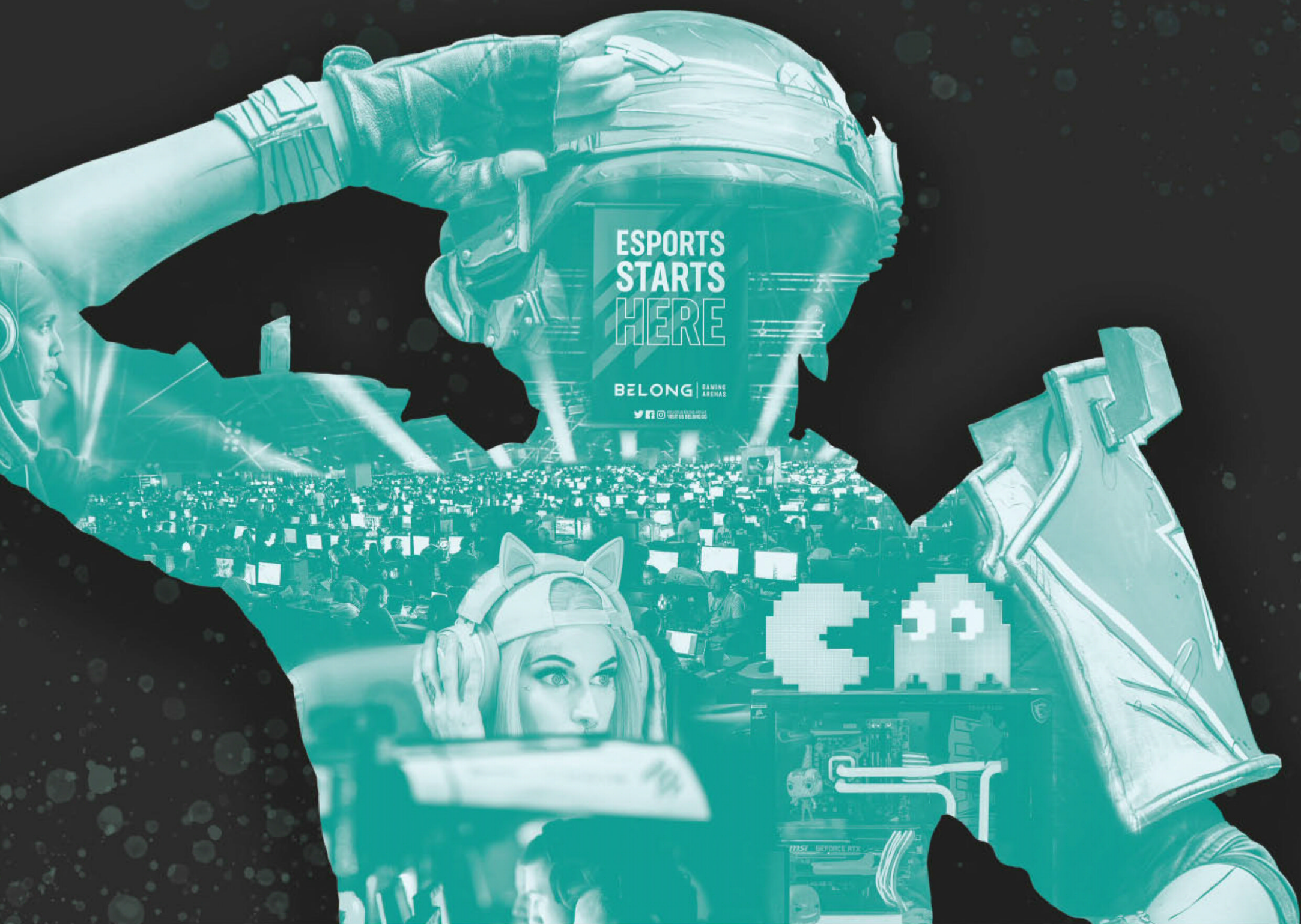
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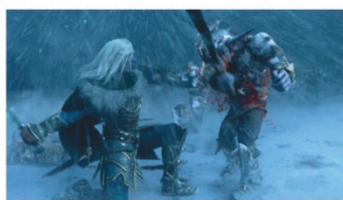
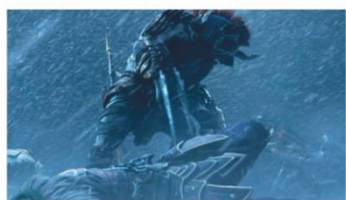


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PREVIEW

Dark Alliance



If we don't fight that dragon, I'll eat my helmet.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2020

DEVELOPER
Tuque Studio

PUBLISHER
Wizards of the Coast

LINK
darkalliance.com

DARK ALLIANCE

Hack and slash your way across Icewind Dale with some mates

Baldur's Gate isn't the only D&D setting being revisited soon. The previously console-exclusive action-RPG series *Dark Alliance* is also returning, and this time the party – which now includes D&D celebrity Drizzt Do'Urden – is hanging out in the chilly, barbarian-infested land of Icewind Dale, trying to keep the frost giant population down.

The original *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* launched on consoles soon after *Baldur's Gate 2* concluded with the *Throne of Bhaal* expansion, but aside from sharing the same setting it was an entirely different kind of fantasy romp. It was a 3D hack-and-slash affair with three classes, couch co-op, and a linear, rollicking campaign that left countless dead monsters in its wake.

Next year's *Dark Alliance* drops 'Baldur's Gate' from the title and takes the action north. Icewind Dale was the setting of a pair of great Infinity Engine RPGs, but it's also famously the stomping grounds of the rebellious Drow hero, Drizzt Do'Urden, originally created by author R.A. Salvatore. You'll be playing him, along with his pals, Cattie-Brie, Bruenor, and Wulfgar.

Drizzt and his buds' adventures have spanned several series, starting with *The Crystal Shard*, but *Dark Alliance* is a standalone romp. "It's a new, unique adventure inspired by the characters, but it is set in and around the events of *The Crystal Shard*," says Jeff Hattem, head of Tuque Studio. "But some of the elements ... will be familiar to fans of the franchise."

"WULFGAR IS THE BASHER – HE'S A SEVEN FOOT TALL, STRONG BARBARIAN"

All four adventurers will be playable together in co-op, both online and offline with split-screen. It's been convenient for Tuque to have such well-defined characters who have not only been developed across a multitude of books, but also already comfortably fit into RPG classes and playstyles. The studio doesn't want to be strict about the class definitions of these characters, however, because they evolved over time and it wants players to have a similar experience.

The adventuring quartet still falls into familiar archetypes, however. "Drizzt is very dashy, quick and agile," says Hattem. "Wulfgar is the basher – he's a seven-foot-tall, strong barbarian. Cattie-Brie is more of a ranged character, where she has a wide range of different abilities that she can use from a distance, and she's super athletic. And there's Bruenor, the father figure of the group and the protector. Using gaming terminology, he's the tank."

LEVEL UP

Dark Alliance has a hub-and-spoke design where the heroes will hang out in a central location where they can pick up quests and go off on side adventures.

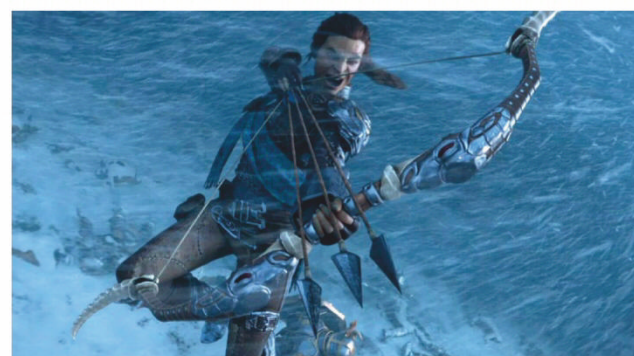
There's a main quest to follow, though it's still a mystery, and you won't have complete freedom over your path, but you'll still have options for how you progress.

This also goes for building your character, picking skills and gear, and creating different loadouts. The skills and abilities that will be making their way over from the tabletop game aren't ready to be revealed yet, unfortunately. There will be a degree of self-expression, however, from the choices you make when you level up, to the appearance of your gear, which is cosmetic as well as practical.

This is how *Dark Alliance* approaches roleplaying, rather than through lots of dialogue choices and story-based character development. There's still some exploration and downtime, but the main focus of the game is action. Specifically, chopping up monsters.

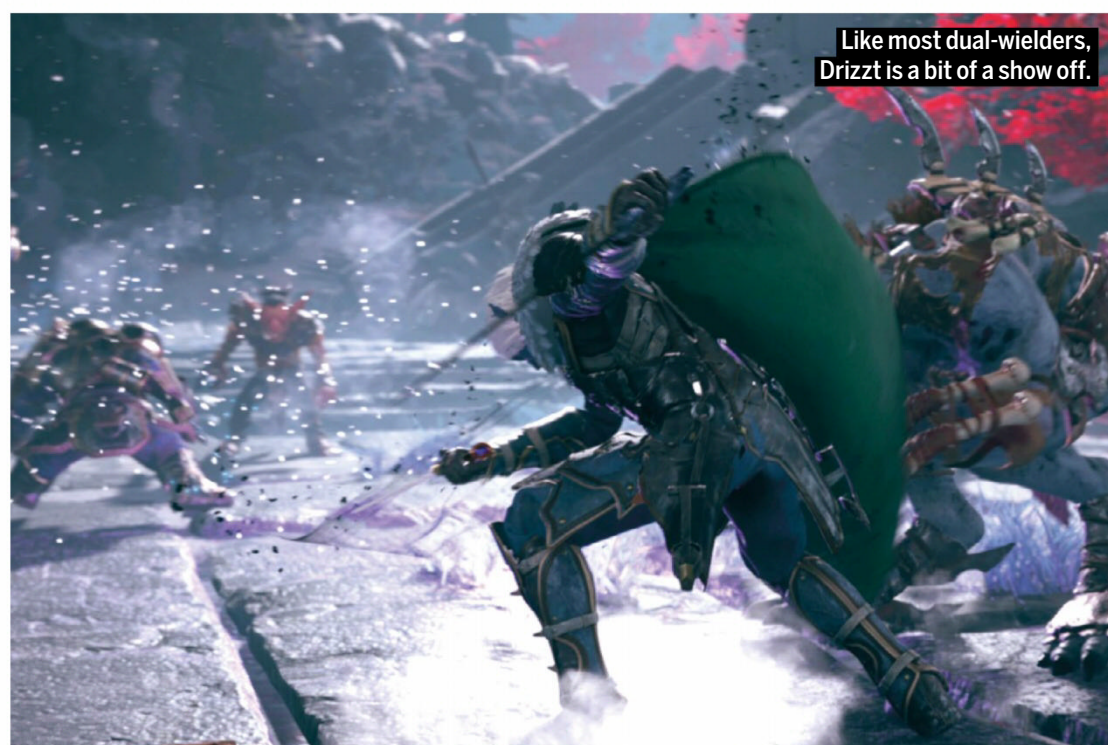
"D&D is super fun and it offers lots of different ways to please different kinds of players," says Hattem. "Our game is the part when the DM says 'roll initiative', and that's when you get going."

Fraser Brown



Flame on.





Like most dual-wielders, Drizzt is a bit of a show off.



PREVIEW

Divinity Original Sin the Board Game

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
October 2020

DEVELOPER
Larian Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
bit.ly/36sTicn

DIVINITY ORIGINAL SIN THE BOARD GAME

Recreating the acclaimed RPG series in card and plastic

PLAYED
IT

While we usually deal only in pixels and microchips across these pages, we're making a special exception for Larian's new board game adaptation. Why? Because it cleaves so closely to the style of the games that they might as well have slapped *Divinity Original Sin 3* on the box.

Any tabletop fan will know that fantasy dungeon crawlers are a dime a dozen these days. What makes *DOS* (hmm, not the best acronym) stand out is how elegantly it recreates the quirks of its source material.

The set-up is broadly familiar – joining a party of four adventurers, we select a character, represented by a plastic miniature and a handful of cards for our class and skills. A story book guides us

through our quests, with prose to describe what's happening, and instructions for setting up the cards and tokens representing each encounter.

It's in combat that things get really exciting. As in the games, elemental magic is the star of the show. A set of easy to track mechanics allow you to douse enemies in oil before setting them on fire, pour rain over them to set them up for freezing or electrocution, and more. It ensures battles are far more than just rolling to hit – they're tense, tactical puzzles of careful area control and status management, with the interlocking effects creating emergent strategies. When our rogue catches fire and we work out the best way to put him out is for our wizard to attack him with a water wand, I know we're playing something special.

Robin Valentine



AS IN THE GAMES, ELEMENTAL MAGIC IS THE STAR OF THE SHOW



FLIP OUT

Locations are represented by a wheel of cards, each being a different area, such as a forest, a stables, or a cave. To explore, you move your character there and flip the card, reading out its text to discover clues, treasure, or enemies. The art actually provides subtle hints as to what you'll find.

Divinity Original Sin the Board Game

**MODEL CITIZEN**

Your hero is represented by a plastic miniature for you to move around the board. You also have cards that detail your skills, abilities, and perks, most of which are taken directly from the games. You can even have Pet Pal – in the demo we grill squirrels and horses for info.

**DICE DICE BABY**

Different attacks and skills roll different kinds of dice, which have different effects. Black dice are your baseline, blue dice are more likely to trigger special buffs or debuffs (such as knocking a target down), and red dice have a greater chance of rolling higher damage results.

**LIKE CLOCKWORK**

The strange timepiece-looking device in the middle of the board is used to track the order of initiative – whose turn it is in combat. It works well in play, but it does feel like it takes up a lot of the board for what it is. A much smaller tracker could probably have achieved the same effect.

**SPEED RUN**

Exploring areas takes time – if it runs out before you've achieved what you set out to do, bad things happen. You're strongly encouraged to split the party to get everything done, making for some tactical play and a bit of tense guesswork as you try to avoid anyone getting into too much trouble alone.

EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

GTFO

Fights are tough and scary,



If in doubt, just throw all the firepower you've got at it.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
10 Chambers Collective

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
gtfothegame.com

GTFO

Four-player co-op in a world that hates you

My teammates and I are dropped into complete darkness at the beginning of another mission. We're apprehensive as we turn our flashlights on – past experiences have taught me that bright lights can disturb the fleshy, distorted creatures that roam these industrial wastes.

The four of us have been forced down here by the mysterious Warden to find the main reactor and switch it back online. Our plan is to first access a terminal through which we can locate our objective, and then make our way there, sneaking through the enclosed metallic maze. It seems straightforward enough, but developer 10 Chambers Collective is adept at throwing out curveballs that put your teamwork to the test.

"There are a lot of games that do cooperation, but there's not much of an emphasis on playing together," the studio's co-founder Svante Vinternatt tells me. "In other co-op games, you can do your own thing and it doesn't really matter if you communicate what you do and where you are. Those games are still fun, but we wanted to push that up a level and really demand that you communicate between teammates in *GTFO*."

This is not a game where you can go in all guns blazing. Sneaking, being cautious and keeping your team informed about your surroundings is the best way to survive. The mutant ghouls waiting for you in the gloom will attack at the first sign of life, so being stealthy is a vital technique.

Creep up behind enemies and you can take them out with a charged melee attack – hugely preferably to dumping a torrent of bullets into them and alerting every other monster in the area.

You have weapons to help you survive, but each player can also choose a specific tool, allowing for some helpful coordination. The scanner, for example, will show you where enemies are lurking – combine that with a mobile gun turret and pack full of landmines, and you can set traps to clear out the largest concentrations of beasts.

Between fights, you also have to deal with light puzzles, and they too require teamwork. One person might need to find and read out a code for another player to type it into a terminal, for example. They're not challenging, but the (relatively) safe chambers they take place in let you catch your breath after an intense encounter and concentrate on something other than survival for a few minutes.

SHADOW PLAY

It's welcome pacing, because fights in *GTFO* can get stressful fast – especially if your best-laid plans don't work out. Where coordination fails, panic reigns, and it can be tough to claw your way back.

A lack of checkpoints makes these moments especially tense – if the whole team dies, you simply have to restart. While that could be frustrating, during my run through each failure just leaves me keen to jump straight back in.

The tactical challenge of beating the mission is one reason to keep playing, but really what keeps drawing me back is the game's carefully-crafted atmosphere. Particles float through the thick air, making you feel like you're in the belly of a metallic beast. A bridge you have to cross will simply end in complete darkness – or, worse, a bank of fog in which a shadowy, half-seen shape moves.

GTFO is out now on Steam Early Access, and 10 Chambers Collective plans to release the final build after a year. But the devs have been working on it since 2015, and it shows in an already remarkably complete experience, balancing stealth, action, and horror for an agreeably frantic co-op experience.

Rachel Watts

PLAYED IT



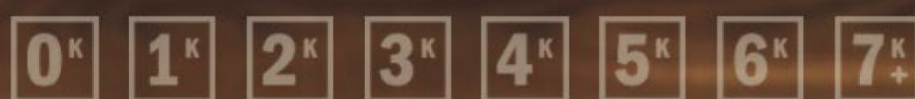
You can all draw on the map to plan out your next move.

"WE REALLY DEMAND THAT YOU COMMUNICATE BETWEEN TEAMMATES IN GTFO"

EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

Kards

The deck-builder features historical descriptions.



Tank

Tanks can both move and attack during the same turn.

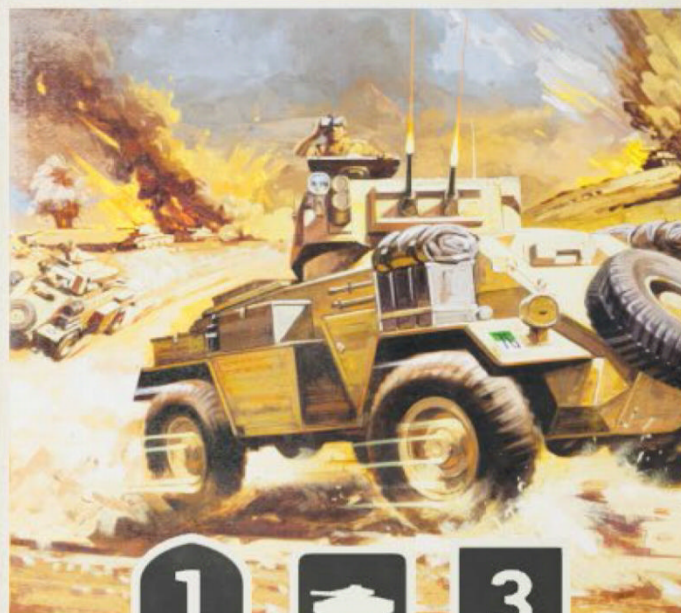


Fury

Units with Fury can attack twice each turn.

1^K₁

HUMBER Mk II



1



3

Fury

HUMBER Mk II

Armored Car



A British Humber Mk II a

The Humber Mk II was a reconnaissance car used by the Allies in WWII. It had a commander's cupola, a machine gun, and a 30 mm Besa machine gun.

Artwork: Doug Posner

SEARCH



SHOW A

Standard CCG tropes are still present.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Spring 2020

DEVELOPER
1939 Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
bit.ly/347tfWx

KARDS

Ex-CCP developers making CCG set in WWII. OMG!

If we were making a game with new mechanics in the fantasy realm, I would be much more worried," says Gudmundur Kristjánsson, former project lead at *Eve Online* developer CCP. "There the competition is so big, there are so many strong titles that are already out there."

Gudmundur left CCP in 2015 to found new studio 1939 Games alongside his brother, former CCP CEO Ivar. Their first game is *Kards*, a WWII-themed collectible card game which entered Early Access in April 2019, and is set for a full release in early 2020. "It's pretty traditional in many ways," Gudmundur tells me. "But then we added quite a lot of innovations that tailor to our inspiration of the Second World War, and strategy and board games."

The biggest of those inspirations is the Frontline. In order to attack the enemy base, you need to first gain control of the battlefield, moving infantry or tank units forward to fight directly against your opponent. Longer-range units can deal damage from further back, but are sitting ducks if they're caught in close-quarters combat. A mana-like system called Credits dictates which cards you can play on a given turn, but more powerful units will also sap your resources when moving or attacking in an attempt to emulate WWII's all-important supply chains.

Each of *Kards'* factions is based on one of the war's five major powers, and Gudmundur says that the developers

"definitely try and respect historical standpoints". Germany emulates its Blitzkrieg strategy with a high-speed early game, while Britain is more defensive, relying on a powerful navy and air force. Soviet units are cheap and plentiful, while the USA's powerful economy dominates in the late game. In spite of historical precedent, those American units do actually fight in the first few turns.

BUILD A DECK

To offer a little more strategic depth, factions can be combined, and at this point historical fact is allowed to fall by the wayside. Gudmundur says that for deck-building "we opted for better gameplay than accuracy, because you get so many possibilities". *Kards* allows Germany to fight alongside Britain against a united USA/Soviet front. In these situations, one nation will take the lead, with its ally contributing 12 out of a deck's 40 cards. The game's most recent expansion introduced France and Italy as supporting factions, which only able to bolster the forces of a major nation.

It's not just national identity that sets these factions apart – *Kards'* artwork has real-world precedent. Iconic propaganda posters like 'We Can Do It' and 'Keep Calm and Carry On' are often used to portray spell-like Order cards, but the studio has also licensed a number of images from classic model companies like Matchbox and Airfix. "We embrace the differences," Gudmundur tells me. "You have Japanese poster art which is completely different from the US posters. We like to highlight that. It's so important in a CCG. It's just sets of numbers – the artwork needs to bring it alive, to tell a story."

It's been a tricky time for CCGs. The genre boomed after *Hearthstone's* launch in 2014, but now shows signs of slowing down. But Ivar says he's not worried, "A lot of the players playing CCGs, they want to try something new. They've been playing fantasy games for decades, and they really like having a different setting. But we're also introducing war and strategy gamers to the genre, and they're finding that card games can be pretty cool. We're seeing a lot of people enjoying card games for the first time in their lives."

Alistair Jones

FIRST
LOOK

"THE ARTWORK NEEDS TO BRING IT ALIVE, TO TELL A STORY"

377

Mk II



armored car, Egypt, 1942.

was a British armored car, used by the British and their crew of 3 (driver, gunner, and a secondary armament of 7.92 mm gun.

t

LL

DONE



NEW YEAR, NEW TECH

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GAMES *of the* DECADE



**LOOKING BACK ON 10
YEARS OF PC GAMING**



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p54 TACTICS



p56 PREDICTIONS

MODERN HISTORY

A look back at the events that shaped the last ten years of PC gaming.

By Alistair Jones

2010

JAN 26, 2010
MASS EFFECT 2
BioWare's sequel launches to huge success and critical acclaim, in the process blurring the genre lines between the action and RPG genres.



MAY 4, 2010
HUMBLE BUNDLE
The very first Humble Indie Bundle launches, proving a smash hit. It includes *World of Goo*, *Aquaria*, *Lugaru HD*, *Penumbra: Overture*, and *Samorost 2*.

JUNE 15, 2010
E3 2010
We get an early look at revolutionary reimagining *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, psychological shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* and sublime sequel *Portal 2*.

A few months before the start of this decade, a game called *League of Legends* entered open beta. Back then, it was impossible to know the extent of the phenomenon it would become - ten years on, Riot's debut game is played by 8 million players every day. But *League of Legends* has also grown to be indicative of the last ten years of PC gaming as a whole. It's been instrumental in the growth of esports and a major indicator of China's increasing relevance in the industry. It's proven a microcosmic version of the rise, fall, and constant recycling of new genres, franchises and platforms. And now, as this decade draws to its close, Riot is showing the old guard that their places at the top aren't as secure as they once were.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

The past ten years have seen a fair share of new ideas. The rise of MOBAs meant that the efforts of *Warcraft III*'s modding community transformed into one of the most successful genres in the world. Years later, history repeated itself as long-term *DayZ* modder Brendan 'PlayerUnknown' Greene kickstarted a global battle royale phenomenon. In 2019, the process began again, as a custom *Dota 2* game mode gave way to a wave of autobattlers from some major studios.

While new genres have emerged, others have solidified their popularity - *Counter-Strike* and *Call of Duty* aren't likely to go away any time soon, but the single-player FPS has made a comeback thanks to the likes of *Doom*, *Wolfenstein*, and *Titanfall*. Elsewhere, the immersive sim seemed to make a triumphant return, only to fall by the wayside again after *Dishonored*, *Prey*, and *Deus Ex* all failed to capture the financial attention required to keep them going. Real-time strategy saw many of its best ideas stripped away and streamlined into other games, but even that time-honoured genre seems poised to make its comeback over the next few years.

Genres have risen, adapted, and died away again throughout the last decade, but the industry is also facing an unprecedented resurgence from classic characters. I don't think we'll ever go a long time without seeing Lara Croft on our screens, but there was a time when the returns of DoomGuy and BJ Blazkowicz

seemed significantly less likely. As a Hollywood-style cautiousness seems to descend slowly across the industry, those familiar faces are found ever further afield, as the likes of Deckard Cain, Sam Fisher, and even Commander Keen make their way to our phone screens.

If the last ten years has shown us anything, it's that trends - even those informed by decades of PC gaming heritage - are nearly impossible to predict.

TWITCH REACTIONS

Esports are by no means an invention of the past ten years. South Korea's *StarCraft* scene was making celebrities of its top-tier players as far back as the early noughties, and competitive gaming has its roots firmly established in '80s arcade culture. But the last decade has seen esports move from the fringes to the mainstream, and nowhere has that move been felt more than on PC.

In 2011, the first *League of Legends* world championships took place at Dreamhack Winter, in front of an audience of around 200 people. Eight years later, that live audience had grown to tens of thousands, with millions more watching at home. The intervening years had seen an exponential rise in esports' popularity - and financial relevance. Early this year, Epic Games

BELOW: DoomGuy returned to rip and tear.



JULY 27, 2010 STARCRIFT II: WINGS OF LIBERTY

A worthy attempt at a follow-up, a task later described by Dustin Browder as "insanely hard... like inventing Basketball 2".



OCT 22, 2010
BLIZZCON 2010
Blizzard presents 'Blizzard DotA' to the world, later changed after a legal battle with Valve to *Blizzard All-Stars*, and then finally to *Heroes of the Storm*.



DEC 7, 2010 WORLD OF WARCRAFT CATAclysm

An expansion that shakes up the MMO's tired world by blowing up half of it, allowing for sweeping redesigns of areas.

» announced that it would be handing out \$100 million in *Fortnite* prize money. \$30 million of that was set aside for the inaugural *Fortnite* World Cup, creating the biggest prize pool in esports history.

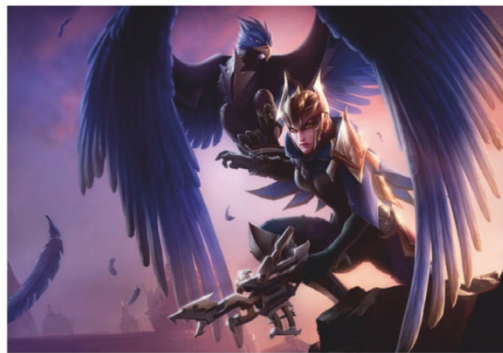
The growth of MOBAs and the enduring popularity of first-person shooters like *CS:GO* has given communities mascots and teams to rally around for years, but now everything from *Hearthstone* to *PUBG* has its own esports scene. All of this might still be a fringe interest, however, if it weren't for streaming. 2011 saw the official launch of Twitch.tv. Purchased by Amazon in 2014, Twitch has transformed the way people enjoy games, and provided the industry with a brand-new marketing tool, playing into the global rise of influencer culture to provide a constant stream of carefully-curated hype. For better and worse, the impact of the biggest streamers is being felt more and more keenly throughout the industry, and as tech giants like Microsoft, YouTube, and Facebook start a bidding war over its emerging household names, that power isn't likely to dissipate any time soon.

LOOK BACK IN VR

In 2010, 17-year-old student Palmer Luckey put together his first virtual reality headset in his parents' basement. By the end of 2012, Luckey had received endorsements from Gabe Newell and John Carmack, and the Oculus Rift's Kickstarter had raised nearly \$2.5 million.

In 2014, Facebook purchased Luckey's company for \$1 billion. The first Rifts found their way into consumers' hands in March 2016, joined on the market by the HTC Vive a week later. But what was originally heralded as a new wave of consumer VR is still yet to fully reach its potential. Games like *Beat Saber* and *Eve Valkyrie* have drawn attention, helped along by well-received adaptations of games *Superhot* and *Skyrim*. But factors like high price-tags means that uptake has been slow – and a limited pool of players means a limited number of developers willing to take the plunge on fully-fledged games rather than virtual reality curios.

Facebook's stake in VR isn't the only big-name investment into this decade's fledgling gaming technology. Announced this year, Google Stadia promised seamless streaming of massive games, but seems to be struggling to live up to that commitment. Early adoption has reportedly been slow, and questions are still to be asked of its relevance to players with anything but the fastest internet connections. The past ten



years have offered up the potential for great leaps forward in the way we experience our games, but the first few steps have, so far, proved stumbling.

THE BIGGER THEY ARE...

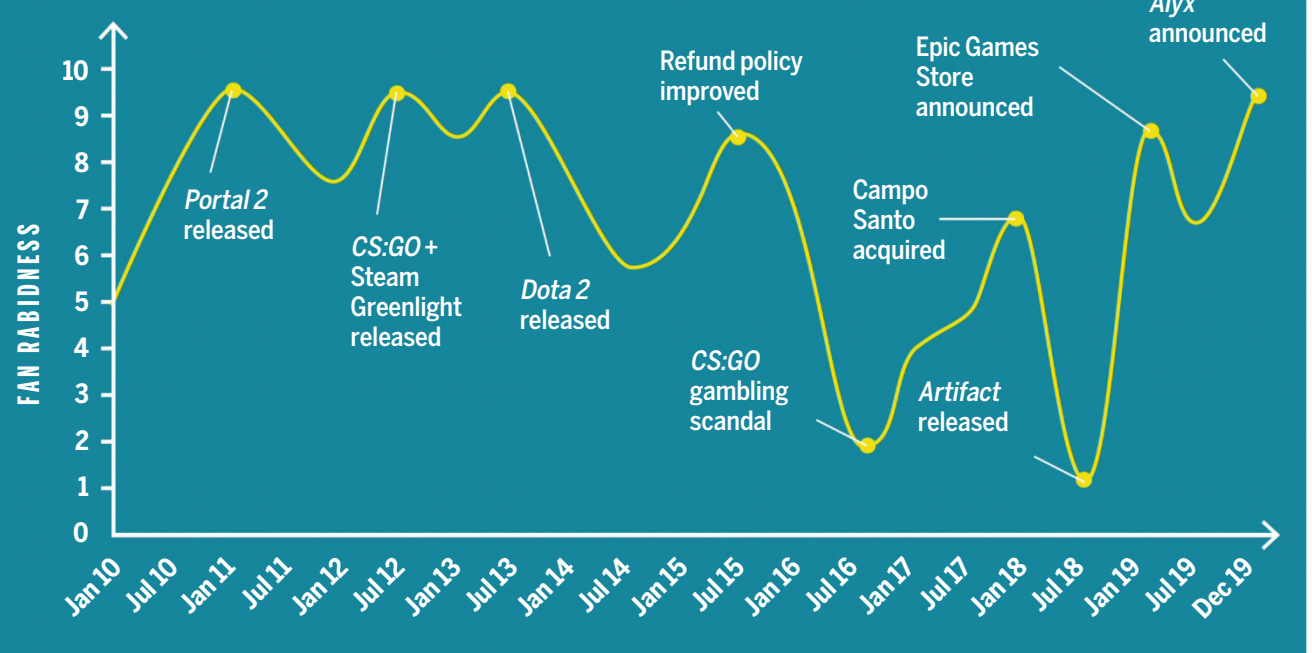
In October 2019, the *Hearthstone* community erupted in anger over the punishment handed down from Blizzard to professional player Ng 'Blitzchung' Wai Chung after he expressed support for the Hong Kong protests during an official livestream. The player was forced to forfeit his prize money (now returned) and was banned from the game for 12 months in accordance with competition rules, but players interpreted the developer's actions as evidence of an increasing desire to protect its interest in the lucrative Chinese market.

China's relationship with PC gaming over the past decade has been complicated. Government intervention restricts access to potentially enormous audiences unless developers can find themselves a local publisher to bring their game to the country. In many cases, that has involved a publisher acquiring an often-hefty share in the

TOP LEFT: *League of Legends* has proved hugely influential.

TOP RIGHT: *CS:GO* enjoys an enduring popularity.

LETTING OFF STEAM Pro-Valve sentiment over time



2011

APRIL 19, 2011 PORTAL 2

After an elaborate, potato-based marketing campaign, Valve releases its follow up to the classic *Portal*, with Stephen Merchant starring.



MAY 17, 2011 THE WITCHER 2: ASSASSIN OF KINGS

CD Projekt launches its RPG sequel – it's a step up from its janky predecessor, and lays foundations for the smash hit third game.



JUNE 7, 2011 E3 2011

Announced early in the year, *Prey 2* shows off a demo at E3, impressing attending journalists. By the end of 2011, the project will be all but dead.





relevant developer. Tencent picked up 93 per cent of Riot Games in 2011, followed by 40 per cent of Epic Games the following year. Both acquisitions changed those companies – and the industry – forever.

The success of *League of Legends* has allowed Riot to position itself as the next big thing, while *Fortnite* might never have seen the light of day without Tencent's interest in games-as-service.

The ensuing phenomenon lead directly to the arrival of the Epic Games Store. Thanks to Steam, Valve had enjoyed an almost monopolistic hold on PC sales for years, but in December 2018, Epic announced its own storefront. The EGS offered developers a healthier cut with less competition, as well as direct access to *Fortnite*'s 200 million-strong audience.

Some sections of the community took umbrage at Epic's aggressive stance on exclusives, but the new store looked set to right a lot of wrongs that Valve had allowed to fester within its platform for years.

Just ten days after the Blitzchung Controversy, Riot celebrated *League of Legends*' ten-year anniversary. In less

THE ENSUING PHENOMENON LEAD DIRECTLY TO THE ARRIVAL OF THE EPIC GAMES STORE

than an hour, the company transformed itself from the developer of a single MOBA into a multi-faceted publisher working on a suite of new titles ranging from card games to first-person shooters. With Blizzard reeling from the effects of one of the worst years in its history, Riot's announcements were seen as a battle cry.

The studio was quick to downplay those claims, citing its deep respect for Blizzard and love for its own IP, but the comparisons had already been drawn.

It's impossible to tell what the next ten years will bring, but the past ten have shown that the status of some of the industry's biggest names might not be quite as secure as we thought, and that there are plenty of new studios itching to take their place. ■

TOP: Palmer Luckey sold his company to Facebook for \$1 billion.

JUNE 27, 2011 BROWN V EMA CASE

In a victory for the industry, the Supreme Court of the United States declares that video-games are protected free speech.

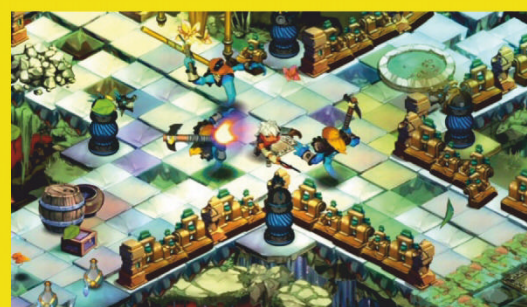
NOV 11, 2011 THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

Bethesda releases its Norse epic and takes over the world for a month. Nearly ten years later, it's still enormously popular.



DEC 9, 2011 BASTION

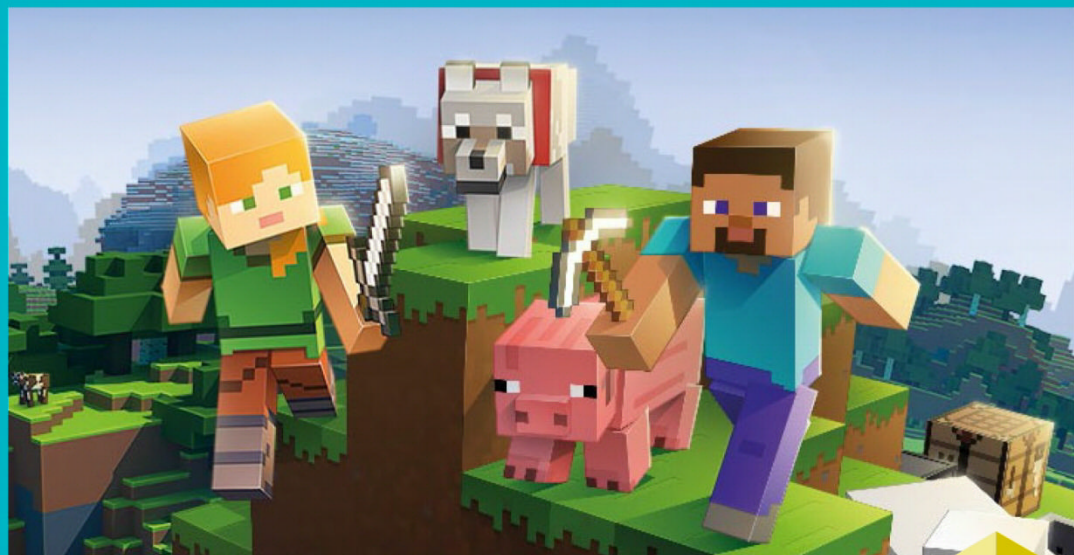
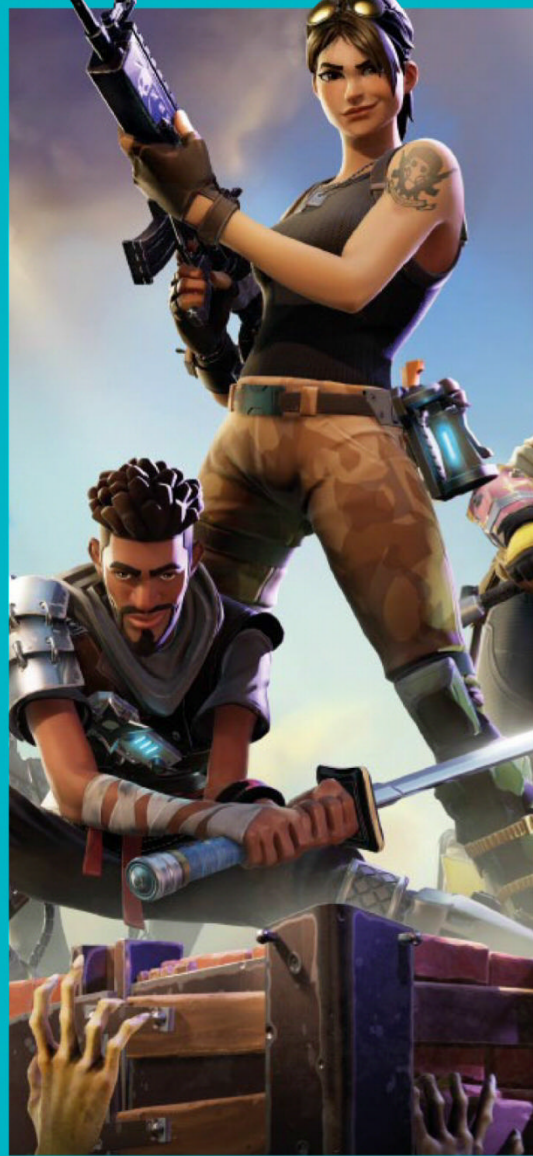
You really couldn't ask for a stronger debut than Supergiant's first release, an indie action-RPG that sparkles with creativity.





HALL OF FAME

The decade's most influential games



2012

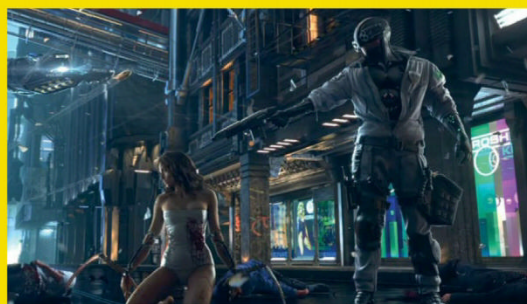
FEB 9, 2012 DOUBLE FINE ADVENTURE

The indie developer launches its first Kickstarter, for the project that will later become *Broken Age*, and raises almost \$3.5 million.



MARCH 6, 2012 MASS EFFECT 3

The last in the trilogy triggers controversy, primarily around its widely derided ending. Later in the year, Bioware patches in a new, more complete finale.



MAY 30, 2012 CYBERPUNK 2077 ANNOUNCED

An extremely early trailer announces *Cyberpunk 2077*, initially about future police hunting down cyber-psychos.



FORTNITE

RELEASED July 25, 2017 | DEVELOPER Epic | PUBLISHER In-house

James: Who said it? Who at Epic Games – during whatever meeting about the questionable outlook of its cooperative base building game finally entering early access after nearly seven years in development, announced in 2011 and delayed multiple times since – who said, “Maybe we could turn it into *PUBG*?”. There’s never been such a rapid, derivative, and successful pivot: *Fortnite*’s barebones battle royale mode was made in two months. And it wasn’t even good.

But, unlike the then-phenom *PUBG*, *Fortnite: Battle Royale* was and still is free-to-play. It didn’t matter that the building system wasn’t made for twitch shooting in a 100-person free-for-all or that the map began as a featureless wasteland. What mattered is that when kids with no money logged into PSN,

Xbox Live, or Googled ‘free PC games’, *Fortnite* was there.

Fortnite was poised to be a temporary craze, but Epic kept it growing with an unprecedented update schedule, introducing new weapons, items, vehicles and major balance changes on a near-weekly

basis. In-game events like the meteor impact or epic mecha vs kaiju battle took *Team Fortress 2*’s narrative and update integration to a new damn dimension.

Fortnite was already massive, but then Ninja streamed with Drake. Suddenly, *Fortnite* wasn’t just how you became a successful Twitch streamer, it was how you became a star. In just a few years, the game legitimised a new kind of celebrity, changed what we expect from F2P and service-based games, and made flossing cool.

UNLIKE PUBG, FORTNITE: BATTLE ROYALE WAS AND STILL IS FREE-TO-PLAY

TEAM FORTRESS 2

RELEASED October 10, 2007 | DEVELOPER Valve | PUBLISHER In-house

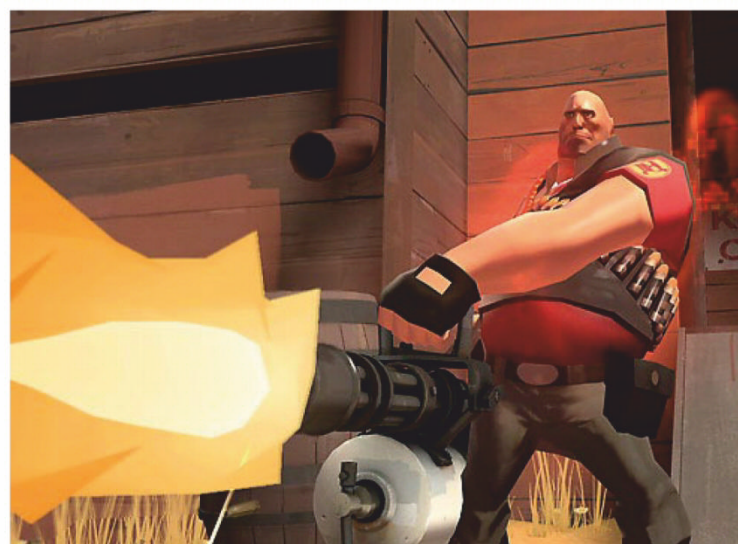
Evan: Between 2009 and 2012, Valve subjected its FPS to an amount of change and experimentation that would have killed a lesser game. What launched as the stylish comeback of a 1999 shooter became a guinea pig for Valve’s ideas and larger initiatives. In the process, RED vs BLU became a platform for inventive storytelling, new technology, and business models that would change Steam and PC gaming forever.

Crawl through the list of 684 updates (and counting), and you notice the escalating pokes, prods and full-body transplants Valve performed on *TF2*.

In 2011, ‘going free-to-play’ was an unusual move for any FPS, and for western-developed games in general. *Team Fortress 2*’s shift from a paid game to now-mainstream microtransaction model invited other developers to adopt the same scheme. But the genius was the way *TF2* entangled narrative with all of these changes. The surprise addition of co-op to a five-year-old competitive game wasn’t a gimmick, it was an invasion of robots within a surprisingly intricate family feud storyline paired with its own trailer, ARG, free webcomic, cosmetic items, microsite, and special set of “Machievements”. A replay system wasn’t just a new feature, but the debut of an annual community film festival. Winners would receive one of the rarest in-game items: the Saxxy, an Oscar trophy wieldable as a melee weapon, and the golden incarnation of *TF2*’s insane obsession with Australia.

This is the true impact of *TF2*: using storytelling to add meaning to game updates. We see it in every major competitive game that’s followed. *Fortnite*’s ambitious brand cameos are built on *TF2*’s playful hat tie-ins.

Usually lab rats die off. Instead, these mutations made *TF2* stronger, and the entire industry learned from Valve’s discoveries.



AUG 1, 2012
OCULUS RIFT
Oculus VR releases its first virtual reality headset, in the process kicking off a modern wave of consumer virtual reality technology... and motion sickness.

OCT 18, 2012
STAR CITIZEN
The space epic launches its Kickstarter, raising over \$2 million. Its crowdfunding campaign continues to this day, and the game still isn’t out.



OCT 25, 2012
FROG FRACTIONS
For a week we’re all baffled by a nonsensical educational browser game that unfolds into a surreal journey that defies all genre and convention.





DARK SOULS

RELEASED August 23, 2012 | DEVELOPER From Software | PUBLISHER Bandai Namco

Wes: How many games can brag about birthing a genre? It's a short list. First there was *Rogue*. Until we all got some collective sense and christened the first-person shooter, there was the *Doom*-clone. *Metroid* and *Castlevania* fused into a beloved style with a hated name. And this decade, From Software gave us the Souls-like. No other game in the 2010s has more dramatically changed how we talk about games, particularly difficulty. Nothing has so quickly inspired so many knock-offs.

More importantly for us, *Dark Souls* is the reason I can browse Steam today and see games like *Ni No Kuni*, *Nier: Automata*, and *Bayonetta*. It may be the only time in history an online petition changed the world. Something like 90,000 people said they wanted a PC port, and publisher

Bandai Namco made it happen. From there, *Dark Souls*' influence carved three new trails. It sold and sold and sold, and so did the sequels, making From Software the most respected developer in Japan not named Nintendo. Its success on PC in the West encouraged other Japanese

DARK SOULS MADE THE INTERNET REALISE JUST HOW IMPORTANT MODDERS ARE

developers to bring their games over, too, and today it's rare for big Japanese games not to launch on PC, or at least get a delayed port.

Finally, *Dark Souls* made the internet realise just how important modders are to PC gaming. Without Durante's DSFix mod the series may never have taken off on PC. The standards for quality ports are now far higher. Meanwhile, From Software got George R. R. Martin to help write its next game, *Elden Ring*. It'll probably be out before his next book.

THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

RELEASED November 11, 2011 | DEVELOPER Bethesda | PUBLISHER In-house

Chris: How do you make a singleplayer game that thousands of people will still play on a daily basis almost ten years after its release? Make it moddable. Does anyone talk about 2016's *Doom* these days? No, because what is there to talk about after you've finished it? But 1993's *Doom* is still making news regularly because it's still being modded after 26 years, and I guarantee people will still be modding *Skyrim* for another decade, too. No need for years of downloadable content, no season passes required. Just give passionate and creative players the tools and freedom they need to craft their own fun.

It helps that even vanilla *Skyrim* is all about freedom and creating your own adventures. Its big open world is packed with quests, stories, characters and lore, but once the tutorial is completed there's very little pushing you in any one particular direction. You can go where you want and be who you want – you're the Dragonborn, sure, but you can play for hundreds of hours without ever kicking off the questline that introduces dragons into the world.

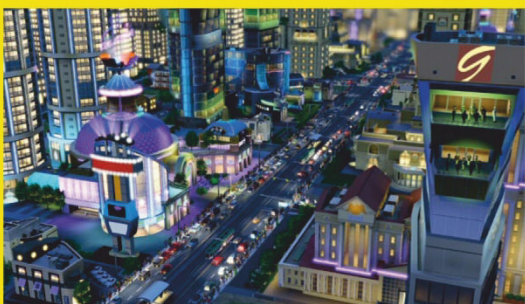
That same spirit of freedom applies to *Skyrim*'s extreme moddability. Nexus Mods, a *Skyrim* modding hub, reports over 1.7 billion downloads, and more than 60,000 different mods. That keeps the ageing RPG fresh with new adventures, companions, locations, weapons, spells, and complete overhauls of game systems long after you've completed the vanilla experience. Just this week alone, 56 new *Skyrim* mods appeared on Nexus Mods for the nine-year-old RPG. There's an entire lifetime of new experiences for players to discover, and a way for *Skyrim* to endure long after Bethesda has moved on to other games.



2013

MARCH 6, 2013 SIM CITY

What promised to be a triumphant reboot for the series turns into a rolling disaster as its dysfunctional always-online features stir up ire with fans.



MARCH 20, 2013 EARLY ACCESS

Steam launches its Early Access program, letting devs sell still in-development games. The landscape of PC gaming is forever changed.

MARCH 26, 2013 BIOSHOCK INFINITE

The long-awaited sequel launches to critical acclaim, praised for its story-telling – though a later backlash questions its politics.





LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

RELEASED October 27, 2009 | DEVELOPER Riot Games | PUBLISHER In-house

Steven: *League of Legends* isn't an esports, it's *the* esports. When Riot Games first started hosting world championships and investing in its competitive scene, it was also inadvertently building the template that nearly every other competitive game would follow – but none would ever fully replicate. Though esports tournaments had happened before, Riot turned *League of Legends* into a spectacle, investing heavily in stage productions and musical performances that turned what would've been just another nerd tournament into a mind-bending multidimensional spectacle. In 2017, for example, Riot used augmented reality tech to make it look like a giant dragon stormed the main stage during a musical performance. Or just last year, when musicians performed alongside 3D hologram characters. It's bonkers.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to how *League* has shaped the scene. The entire infrastructure of esports as a business was pioneered by Riot. When it created the NA and EU League Championship Series, it turned esports into a year-round event much like any other sport – in turn also legitimising competitive gaming as a full-time job. And that shift didn't just enable players to go full-time, it also created jobs in commentating, esports journalism, and production. With Riot's help, esports went from being a hobby to a career.

That still doesn't cover all the ways *League of Legends* has influenced the games industry, either. Riot was one of the first companies to adopt an aggressive update schedule that continually added to and rebalanced the game, creating a meta that kept players engaged for thousands of hours. It also was a major contributor to the growth of Twitch and remains one of its most-watched games, helping legitimise an entire industry of streamers. And though *League of Legends* isn't solely responsible for any one of these innovations, you'd be hard-pressed to find a game with a wider impact this past decade.

JULY 9, 2013 DOTA 2

While Valve's sort-of sequel isn't the first major MOBA, it makes a serious splash on launch – and has a huge impact on the world of esports.



AUG 8, 2013 SPELUNKY

The highly influential 2009 freeware game gets a definitive PC remake, enhancing its looks but preserving its near-perfect core of roguelike action.



DEC 7, 2013 VGX AWARDS

After a questionable rebrand, Spike TV hosts one last impossibly awkward and dysfunctional game awards show. Geoff Keighley sets out to make his own.



THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

RELEASED May 19, 2015 | DEVELOPER CD Projekt RED | PUBLISHER In-house

Wes: In 2007, if you'd told anyone on a videogame forum that a sequel to a messy RPG, made by an inexperienced Polish studio, would be the biggest and best RPG of the next decade, they'd probably laugh you off the board. Really? That game? *The Witcher*? Sure, it's got some good ideas, but it's barely bolted together, and who's ever heard of these Polish fantasy novels? That's never going to be big.

How wrong our hypothetical forum-goer would be.

The Witcher 3 hit the industry like a meteor. It followed a pair of much smaller RPGs with a vast open world, and filled that world with writing (so much writing) that elevated standard sidequests into memorable hunts, heartbreaking stories, and wonderful adventures. With two games of

practice, CD Projekt Red learned how to make Geralt a perfect vehicle for players. He's a person, not a blank slate, which enriched the impact of every difficult moral decision you were forced to make. The average *Witcher 3* sidequest is more creative and better presented than the main story of most other RPGs – and its main story is another step beyond that.

It's a game that combines an impressive breadth of space with an incredible density of content within it. Every inch of the world feels crafted, authored, purposeful. There are no meaningless errands to run or shallow, randomly generated quests to pad out your journey. *The Witcher 3* is all killer, no filler, across a mind-boggling 200 hours of main game and DLC.

Its massive success entered CD Projekt into the elite ranks of the most respected game developers in the world. When was the last time a game was as highly-anticipated as *Cyberpunk 2077*? Maybe never. When it's finally real, it'll have remarkably high expectations to live up to: expectations that it'll be as good as *The Witcher 3*, the benchmark for RPGs this decade. And maybe the next.

2014

FEB 12, 2014 TWITCH PLAYS POKEMON

A stream of an emulated Game Boy game played via a flow of commands from the chat reaches millions of people.



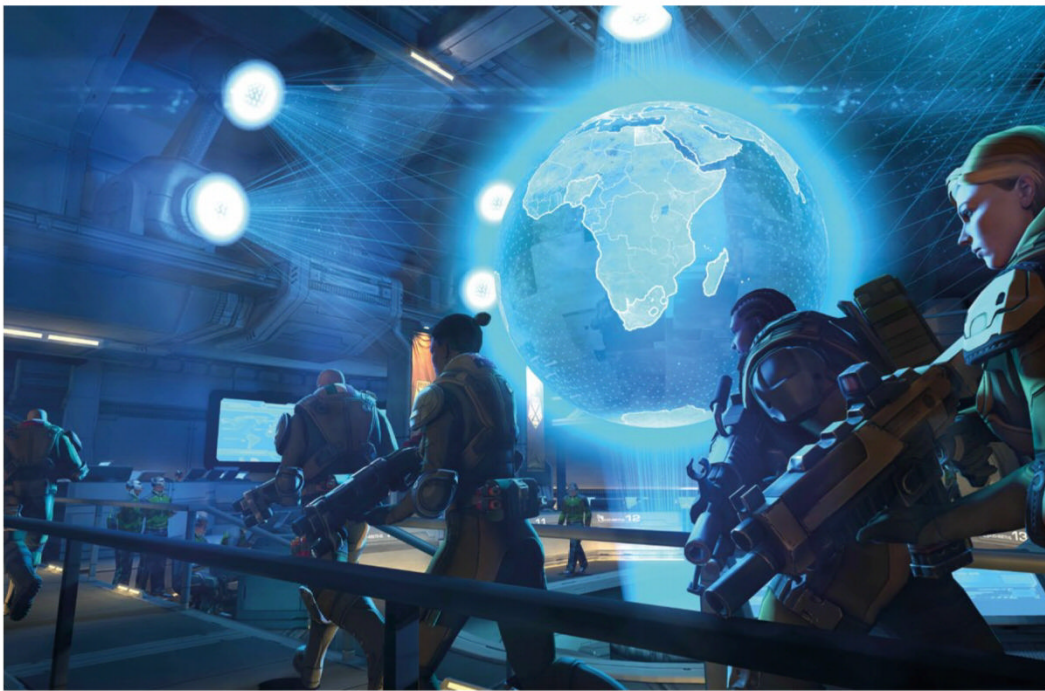
MARCH 25, 2014 FACEBOOK BUYS OCULUS

The VR firm is bought out by Mark Zuckerberg, his head no doubt swimming with visions of the virtual social spaces of the future.



AUG 16, 2014 GAMERGATE BEGINS

With one angry blog post, a bitter ex sets in motion a rolling hate mob that exposes the rancid underbelly of the gaming community.



XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

RELEASED October 9, 2012 | DEVELOPER Firaxis | PUBLISHER 2K Games

Tom: Sometimes a game can rescue an entire genre. We enjoyed some niche turn-based strategy games before Firaxis' spectacular *XCOM* reboot, but this game pulled the genre closer to the mainstream with cinematic production values, a friendly art style, and – most importantly – a set of *XCOM* recruits that inspire tremendous empathy across the course of a long and gruelling campaign.

You can build a beautiful numbers system based on gear power and chances to hit, but it's something else to translate those stats into drama. It's the drama that makes you hold your hands to your head and cry, "Noooo!" when Sergeant 'Balls Balls' misses a Chrysalid at point-blank range and is immediately murdered halfway through a mission.

That might seem frivolous, but that reboot has gone on to inspire many new *XCOM*-style games in different settings. There are obvious examples like *Phoenix Point*, but we've also seen weirder games like *Mutant Year Zero*. You could even look at games like *Into the Breach* and claim that *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* opened a door to new audiences that would appreciate such a balanced tactics game.

THAT REBOOT HAS GONE ON TO INSPIRE MANY NEW XCOM-STYLE GAMES IN DIFFERENT SETTINGS

Turn-based tactics games have done surprisingly well on console, if you take into account *Pokemon*, *Advance Wars*, *Shadow Emblem*, *Final Fantasy Tactics*, *Tactics Ogre* and more. *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* went back to the source – an old, obtuse, but brilliant game – and modernised it perfectly, bringing tactics games back to their old home on the PC.

MINECRAFT

RELEASED November 18, 2011 | DEVELOPER Mojang | PUBLISHER In-house

Chris: Selling a game before it's finished is practically the industry standard these days, but before Kickstarter, Steam Early Access, Fig, and other crowdfunding tools became popular, there was *Minecraft*. In 2009 it was in an alpha state, nowhere near feature complete with years of development still ahead. But its barebones free alpha had received a positive, excited response, and developer Markus Persson decided it was time to start making the money needed to fuel the rest of its development. The alpha went on sale in June of 2009, with the promise that those who bought it for a few dollars now would get all future updates at no additional cost.

It's a format we now take for granted: buying an incomplete game at a discount in the hopes it'll someday be finished and we'll have saved a few bucks – and maybe we'll also get to suggest new features that will end up in the game. The initial trickle of sales quickly became a flood, to the point where Persson's account was frozen by PayPal, which became suspicious of the massive influx of money. By 2011 *Minecraft* had sold a million copies. By 2013, 10 million.

In 2014 Persson sold *Minecraft* to Microsoft, and it's now the best-selling video game of all time, with sales somewhere around 180 million copies on just about every platform available. *Minecraft*'s design, its procedural open worlds, and its deep crafting systems have been heavily influential to scores of other games, but it also set the stage for a decade of Early Access, paid alphas, crowdfunding, and two distinct promises that aren't always kept – for customers, you can buy in early, save money and influence the final project, and for devs, you can fund your game's development by selling it before it's done.



SEP 15, 2014
MICROSOFT BUYS MINECRAFT
Creator Markus Persson aka Notch cashes in on his smash hit indie game by selling his studio Mojang to Microsoft.



NOV 11, 2014
ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY
Graphical issues and bugs plague this sequel's release, most memorably in the form of nightmarish facial distortions.

DEC 5, 2014
THE GAME AWARDS 2014
Following his split from Spike TV, Geoff Keighley puts on his first independent game awards. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* gets the top prize.



ACCESS ALL AREAS

How unfinished games became their own genre

By Chris Livingston

The first game I ever bought from Steam Early Access was a survival sandbox called *Under the Ocean*. I played it, enjoyed it and tried out new alphas as they were released over the next few months. As time passed, the game's scope grew, devblogs and roadmaps were published, and new features like multiplayer were discussed with the fans. In 2014, things began to change. Communication from the developers slowed to a trickle.

On February 3, 2015, developer Paul Hart revealed that *Under The Ocean's* programmer had quit. Hart said he still wanted to finish the game, though he didn't know when or how it would happen because he would be "restarting the project from scratch".

Refunds weren't an option – the money earned from Early Access sales was completely gone. The eighth alpha

PLAYERS HAND OVER MONEY THINKING THEY'RE BUYING A GAME, BUT THEY'RE NOT

still exists in the libraries of those who bought it, but the game is no longer on Steam.

When we think of gambling in games our minds immediately go to loot boxes, but there's no bigger gamble than Early Access. Players hand over money thinking they're buying a game, but they're not. They're placing a bet and they have no way of knowing if they'll win, or even what they'll win. Sometimes it works out and everyone, devs and customers, are happy. Other times players wait years, and wind up with a game they don't like, or one vastly different than the one they thought they were paying for.

Steam Early Access was launched in March 2013 with a total of 12 games, but that number quickly grew. All

genres of games can appear in Steam Early Access, but survival games especially leaned on it hard, mostly due to Bohemia Interactive's *DayZ*. The standalone version of the popular mod entered Early Access in December of 2013, and sold 400,000 in a week. Within a year Bohemia Interactive had sold over 3 million copies.

After *DayZ* became a top seller and a massive success despite not even being finished, Steam quickly became packed with unfinished Early Access survival games. Many were just frameworks: an open world and a few basic survival systems to keep players busy while the devs continued to develop their games. Players could scavenge gear and supplies, eat and drink to keep their meters filled, engage in some basic crafting systems, and deal with some sort of threat: zombies usually, wild animals occasionally, and most often, other Early Access players.

A new genre was born: not just survival games, but Early Access survival games.

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

I love survival games and bought and played a ton of them in Early Access myself, many of which I barely remember the details of now. I bought *Starforge* (which is now gone from Steam). I bought *Reign of Kings*. *The Long Dark*. *Rust*, *Ark: Survival Evolved*, *Unveil*, *Miscreated*, *Empyrion*, *Frozen State*, *Hurtworld*, *Grav*, *Better Late than Dead*, *Three Days*, *The Solus Project*, and many more.

DayZ only left Early Access at the end of 2018, five years after it set the trend, and even after all that time it still didn't contain all the features originally planned. *Ark* sold millions of copies and is still one of the most-played



TOP: Boxy forts were a common feature in Early Access survival games.

ABOVE: Be careful around campfires in *Three Days*.

2015

FEB 3, 2015
JOYSTIQ CLOSES
AOL officially shuts its long-running and influential games news website as part of a larger downsizing strategy. Many great journo lose their job.

MARCH 4, 2015
MAXIS CLOSES
EA shuts down Maxis headquarters, effectively killing the *SimCity* and *Spore* studio as we know it and absorbing its staff into the wider EA ecosystem.



APRIL 24, 2015
SKYRIM PAID MODS
Bethesda launches an initiative that offers user-made mods for sale. The backlash is quick and in days the project is abandoned.



GAMES of the DECADE

2010 - 2020



games on Steam, but had a number of controversies in Early Access, including selling DLC while still in an unfinished state. *Just Survive* spawned King of the Kill, a massively popular battle royale mode, but the survival mode languished for years, underwent a major retooling, went free to play, and then shut down for good in 2018.

In that same year another post titled 'The Last Update' appeared on Steam for *Under The Ocean*, stating that game was dead. If you attempt to open the last published roadmap in Google Docs, you're informed that the "File is in owner's trash". The developer promised a key to any upcoming projects for customers that provide a receipt for *Under The Ocean*. "I want to start to tackle smaller projects that I can realistically finish between working a job and being a decent father, and I hope you join me for the ride," he said. "Maybe one day *Under the Ocean* will live again." Anything is possible, but I wouldn't bet on it. ■



TOP: *Ark* weathered Early Access to become one of the most played games on Steam.

LEFT: "*Rust* is one of the cruellest games on Steam," so says us.

MAY 19, 2015
THE WITCHER 3
CD Projekt stuns the industry by launching an open-world RPG of unbelievable detail and depth, firmly establishing it as the powerhouse it is today.



JUNE 16, 2015
E3 2015
We host our first ever PC Gaming Show, welcoming to the stage *Planet Coaster*, *American Truck Simulator*, *Rising Storm 2: Vietnam*, and more.



AUG 6, 2015
PALMER LUCKEY'S TIME COVER
The Oculus Rift developer poses for a truly bizarre magazine cover on which he frolics on a virtual beach.



COUCH POTatoes

As AAA studios left local multiplayer to die, indie developers stepped up to save it.

By Luke Winkie

2016

JAN 8, 2016 MARC LAIDLAW LEAVES VALVE

Once head writer on the *Half-Life* series, Marc leaves the studio. Later, he posts a synopsis of where the *Half-Life* story was to go next.



FEB 9, 2016 RIOT BUYS RADIANT ENTERTAINMENT

The developer of robot brawler *Rising Thunder* are snapped up to work on the upcoming *LoL* fighting game.



FEB 26, 2016 STARDEW VALLEY

Developed by just one man, this charming indie farming sim takes the world by storm – within a year it's sold 3.5 million copies.

Mark Essen has a simple justification for initially leaving out an online multiplayer mode in *Nidhogg*: the tech was difficult to build and expensive to deploy. He did not have an army of netcode experts ready to squash bugs, reduce latency and seamlessly connect to servers. It was far more important to make sure the bow felt right.

“You’d need two computers, or you could possibly set it up on one computer on multiple windows,” says Essen, as he wistfully reflects on his halcyon days of wheeling the prototype of *Nidhogg* to every indie showcase in the whole world. “Just practically, it’s harder to make an online-only multiplayer game.”

You probably know what happened from there. *Nidhogg* finally arrived on Steam in the beginning of 2014 (with network play implemented) and immediately sparked a flashbulb consumer moment in gaming. Here was a 2D, one-versus-one sword-fighting simulator, with simple mechanics, a Luddite Atari 2600 art style, and a distinct focus on couch multiplayer, that seemed entirely out of step with the rest of the videogame industry. Didn’t matter, it still sold like crazy. Five years later, *Nidhogg* remains one of the most thrilling experiences of the decade. Living proof that the world is still capable of falling in love with local multiplayer. Innovation, through limited means. It’s almost horrifying to imagine what would’ve happened if *Nidhogg* had a real budget.

THE COUCHPOCALYPSE

The story of videogames in the 2010s is the story of us slowly conceding our brains to the internet, all for the promise of more purple guns in *Destiny*. Despite our protests, and despite the fact that deep down, we probably know better, nearly everyone gaming on PCs is clinically attached to some sort of always-online robber baron. What’s your vice? *Hearthstone*, *Fortnite*, *League of Legends*, *Dota 2*? They are all great games, but they’re also all devious machines built to levy our wallets with the power of new skins, new maps, and bimonthly updates. The idea of buying a game so you can play it in its native state, offline, without patching or installing, with friends and family is a rapidly crumbling memory. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* is one of the great couch games of all time. Its 2019 rebirth, of course, shipped without local competitive multiplayer.

This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, or a good thing. It is, simply, the state of things. Triple-A publishers, in the megagame era, are betting on the interminable contraptions that keep the service model viable. Thankfully, indie studios stepped up to the plate throughout the decade to remind us of a time when multiplayer didn’t require an account password and a Wi-Fi connection. *Duck Game*, *Stick Fight*, *Gang Beasts*. These were all modern games built on the archaic bones of *Goldeneye* and *Halo* – a time before placement matches, when superiority was only ranked on a dorm-room floor. And like *Nidhogg*’s origin story, most were constructed that way in order to cut costs. Beau Blythe tells me he was living in his parents’ garage when he began work on the essential *Samurai Gunn*. Any added features on top of the core gameplay were out of the question.

“Local multiplayer is more accessible to small studios and independent developers since you don’t have to



LEFT: *Nidhogg* took things all the way back to the Atari 2600 with its duelling system.

BELOW: If you’ve got a big enough couch, four people can play *Duck Game* together.



MARCH 7, 2016 FABLE LEGENDS CANCELLED

The *Fable* series appears to die away for good as Microsoft cancels this – though if rumours are to be believed there’s a new game in the works.



MAY 24, 2016 OVERWATCH

Blizzard launches its ‘hero shooter’. A rabid fanbase seems to spring up almost instantly, and the landscape of multiplayer gaming is changed forever.



JUNE 10, 2016 THE WARCRRAFT MOVIE

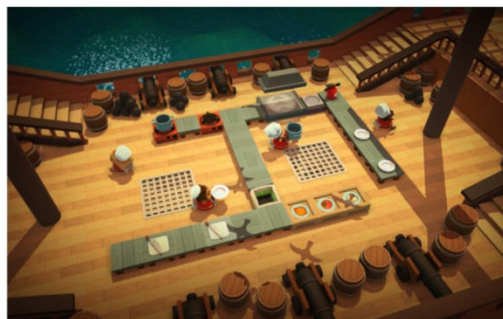
Duncan Jones’ lavish, CGI-heavy adaptation releases to rather muted reactions – though it goes on to gross \$439 million worldwide.

» provide online infrastructure, community management, and marketing to build a player base,” says Blythe, who’s currently hard at work on *Samurai Gunn 2*. “I imagine large studios view local multiplayer as a feature that will be seldom used, so it’s not worth implementing. You would have to design for it from the start, and there are limited technical resources when you consider the graphical fidelity that these games are trying to reach. To require two-player support, you would have to render everything twice. It’s a lot to think about and it doesn’t ensure any more sales.”

ANTI-MARKET RESEARCH

Daniel Sterger, the designer of the hilarious, outstandingly pornographic *Mount Your Friends*, believes that as a rule indie developers tend to exploit inefficiencies in the Triple-A market. “We have to push against mainstream trends to an extent,” he says. “We don’t have the ability to compete head-to-head so we

TEAM PLAY *The games that made us believe in the couch again*



turn to niches we believe have an audience that isn’t being approached by the industry.” Sterger continues by noting that his presence outside a major studio allows him to not be stymied by market research or a massive, micromanaged design team, which allowed him to experiment with, say, a videogame about ascending a mountain made of jiggling flesh.

Another, more specific reason? *Mount Your Friends* was first conceived in a game jam and built in a weekend. So many indie games first make a name for themselves on the tour of PAXes, Cons and other industry bacchanals, and local multiplayer became the ideal way to demonstrate a project seeking publisher support in 15 minute intervals on a hectic show floor.

“[It gives] developers easy access to people unfamiliar with their game to test their designs, [compared to] an idea built around level design, complex AI, or worldbuilding,” says Sterger.

NOSTALGIA, ULTRA

Most importantly though, each of the developers I spoke to harboured a deep, fundamental passion for local multiplayer, and some expressed dismay about the direction the gaming hobby is going. It often feels like big budget publishers expect us to sink thousands of hours into their new hubworld, and its new systems and

ABOVE: We will all remember our first *Overcooked!* disaster.

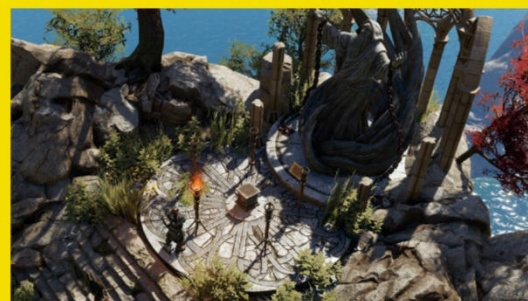
LEFT: *Rocket League* took local multiplayer momentum all the way to an international esports scene.

2017



MARCH 21, 2017
MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA
BioWare’s shot at both redeeming and soft-rebooting *Mass Effect* goes horribly awry as they unveil a messy adventure full of bugs.

JUNE 12, 2017
NOTCH GOES WRONG
Markus Persson, now a billionaire, tweets an unprintable insult at developer Zoe Quinn and formally kicks off his slide into online alt-rightery.



SEPT 14, 2017
DIVINITY ORIGINAL SIN II
Larian’s impressive follow-up cements the studio’s newly prestigious status. It’s so good, it takes the number one spot of our Top 100 list.



EACH OF THE DEVELOPERS I SPOKE TO HARBOURED A DEEP PASSION FOR LOCAL MULTIPLAYER

endlessly refreshing suite of seasonal events and corresponding thresholds of loot. Sometimes, when I miss a new game in its first week of release, it feels like I'll never be able to catch up.

Landon Podbielski, designer of *Duck Game*, says his aesthetic true north is the euphoria he felt as a kid playing *ToeJam & Earl*, *TimeSplitters*, and *Halo: Combat Evolved* – three games that arrived before the living-game singularity. “I wanted something new to play with my friends,” he remembers on his time toying around with GameMaker in 2013. “I showed him a platformer game I was working on starring a duck. He told me I should make it so we could fight each other. I added a second duck and a shotgun, and *Duck Game* was born.”

TOP: Who would've thought that *Brawlhalla* could create its own *Smash Bros* ecosystem on PC?

Podbielski tells me he will never forgive *Halo 5*, which added a clumsy MOBA-like veneer on top of Microsoft's stainless formula, leading to widespread fan revolt and a trip back to the drawing board for 343 Studios. It's the sort of game that represented an unseemly tipping point, where a thirsty emphasis on commodification superseded the legacy of a classic franchise. Obviously, it's impossible to match the unlimited resources bequeathed to Master Chief, but, thankfully, indie developers have picked up the slack and have spent this decade constructing a decent facsimile of the reasons they fell in love with videogames. *Call of Duty* isn't returning to its split-screen roots any time soon. But surprisingly, the past ten years has taught us that a duck with a shotgun does a decent job of summoning the same feeling. “Someone will always be pumping out that delicious bubble gum pop, but there will always be people who've chewed too much gum and want a new thing,” finishes Podbielski. “As long as we make what we love it'll make us happy above all else, and when culture wraps around again in a decade or so, our weird shit will be relevant again.” ■



SEPT 26, 2017
FORTNITE BATTLE ROYALE
Co-op survival game *Fortnite* releases an experimental new mode based on *PUBG*'s 'battle royale' gameplay. The rest, as they say, is history.



NOV 9, 2017
EA BUYS RESPAWN
After two *Titanfall* games, EA snaps up the studio. Less than two years later, the investment pays off with the release of *Apex Legends*.

NOV 17, 2017
STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II
A particularly egregious implementation of loot boxes brings the issue firmly into the public eye, triggering mass outrage.



GAMES of the DECADE

2010-2020



MY TURN

How turn-based tactics won the decade.

By Fraser Brown

There have been few moments over the last ten years where I've been far from a grid full of little soldiers duking it out turn by turn. There was a lull, certainly in attention, after the '90s, but then *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* came along and lit a fire under the genre, arguably kicking off the decade of turn-based tactics games – a title I'd never have imagined it earning at the start.

I say 'arguably' not because there is any doubt that this has been a fantastic decade full of smart, tactical

battles, but because the extremely slick *Frozen Synapse* came out in 2011, a year before *XCOM*, and was just as impressive. It didn't quite have the same impact, however. *XCOM* is a reimagining of a series that was already acclaimed, but with a more cinematic and character-driven bent. Squads are also smaller, but more customisable, making the loss of any of them devastating – a trend that's largely been continued.

XCOM has even changed the way we talk about games. If you want to describe the broad strokes of a turn-based tactics game now, you can just say it's 'like *XCOM*' and people

2018

**FEB 27, 2018
INTO THE BREACH**

The developers of *FTL* release one of the most tightly designed strategy games ever made. It's so good it wins our Game of the Year award.



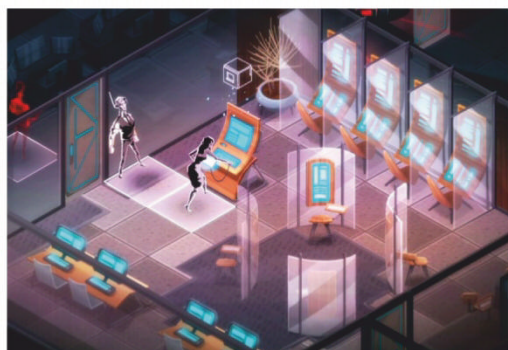
**MAY 14, 2018
BOSS KEY CLOSÉS**

Gears of War creator Cliff Bleszinski shuts his studio after the failure of *Lawbreakers* and an abortive attempt at a battle royale game.



**NOV 2, 2018
BLIZZCON 2018**

A tepid showing is closed out with the announcement of *Diablo Immortal*. The reveal goes down like a lead balloon, creating a rift between the studio and its fans.



TACTICAL ANALYSIS

How we reviewed some of our favourite tactics games



XCOM 2
94%
"Exceptionally tough, rewarding strategy and a masterful reworking of the formula. We'll play this forever."



INTO THE BREACH
93%
"Into the Breach delivers in the tiniest package the most perfectly formed tactics around."



FROZEN SYNAPSE
89%
"A game of tactics and psychology, won by wits instead of reflexes. Good against AI, great with friends."



BATTLETECH
85%
"A tactical wargame with strong fundamentals supporting a successful campaign."

will probably know what you're talking about. That's not to say there haven't been games to follow in its wake that defy that definition, and those that do still find new and different ways to set themselves apart.

Its influence still looms large, but the genre might have floundered again if everyone was just chasing Firaxis' remake. Instead, the flexibility of tactics games has led to things like *Invisible, Inc.*, where soldiers and aliens are replaced by cyberpunk spies and hackers. It's a stealthy roguelike affair where you want to avoid killing. The random maps are high-tech puzzles full of alarms, doors and turrets waiting to be hacked, with danger increasing

LEAVING IT UP TO SINGLE-MINDED DEVS AND 'INDIE' PUBLISHERS TO DRIVE THE GENRE

with each turn. A simple slip-up can cause the most methodical of infiltrations to go awry, leading to a heart-thumping – but still turn-based – chase.

Combat and action still dominate, but that leaves room for games as dramatically different as *Age of Wonders: Planetfall* and *Wargroove*. One is a sci-fi 4X game with tactical battles, while the other is pure tactics game inspired by *Advance Wars*. They are universes apart, even if they share a few fundamentals. Triumph Studios had to take a gamble when it revived the *Age of Wonders* series with *Age of Wonders 3*, publishing the game itself, but it paid off, paving the way for expansions and the sequel. *Wargroove*'s story is similar, with Chucklefish noticing the gap left by a classic game and creating something to fill it.

Even now, big publishers generally don't seem interested in these games, leaving it up to single-minded devs and 'indie' publishers to drive the genre.

MECHING A MEAL OF IT

What you do outside of the tactical battles has grown in importance, with campaigns full of construction and unit management that take up almost as much time as the fights themselves. All these elements have been around since the '90s, but modern tactics games have really leaned into them, and none more so than *BattleTech*.

I'm on a big *BattleTech* kick at the moment and if I ever want to see the campaign through I'm going to have to make it my life. The galaxy-scale sandbox gives you a ship, a crew and a bewildering number of directions. Every new system is another opportunity to find more weapons and modules for my mechs, along with parts that can be used to construct even more of them, so I'm endlessly tweaking and building.

While I live for this stuff, it means nothing if the turn-based battles are rubbish. *Into the Breach*, our 2018 Game of the Year, was a reminder of what really makes these games so compelling. There's still a campaign and character progression, but you're only ever a few minutes away from another engaging brawl. It's straightforward, but don't think for a second that makes it any less capable of conjuring up some bastard-hard tactical puzzles.

Like the best mechs and *XCOM* agents, the turn-based tactics genre is reliable. Sure, that's not as sexy as battle royales and MOBAs doing dizzying numbers and causing mass hysteria, and yeah, maybe it sounds a bit like I'm describing a truck, but it's probably going to outlast a lot of this decade's trends. That's because it's more than just a trend – it's a genre that's once again found its footing. ■

ABOVE: *Age of Wonders: Planetfall* made its mark.

TOP RIGHT: *Divinity: Original Sin 2* is at least 50 per cent tactics game (and 100 per cent on fire).



NOV 28, 2018
ARTIFACT

Valve has a rare taste of true failure as its card game spin-off's unusual business model fails to strike a chord with already well-served online-CCG players.



DEC 6, 2018
EPIC GAME STORE

The *Fornite* developer launches its own storefront, an implicit challenge to Valve. It proves controversial, especially among Steam's diehard fans.

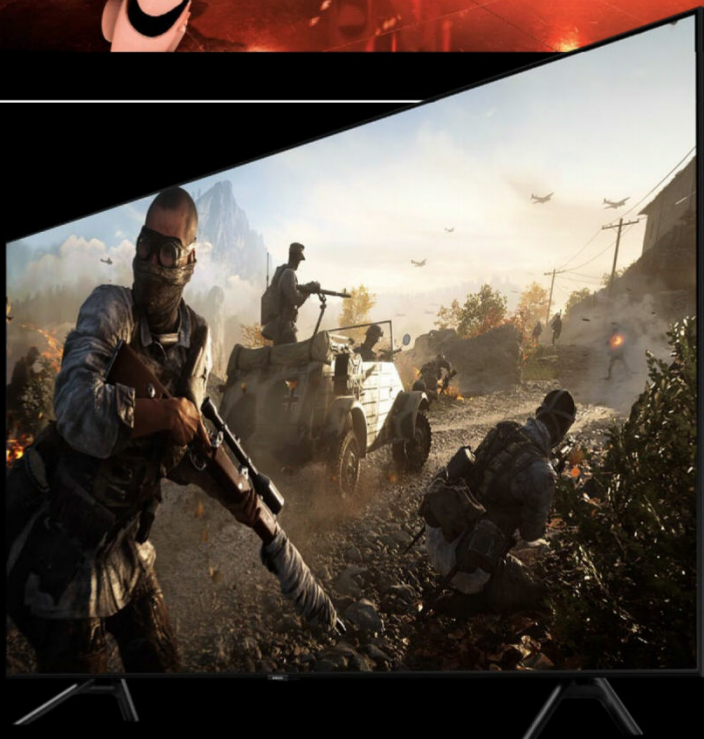


NOV 14, 2018
FALLOUT 76

Bethesda launches a new take on *Fallout*. The release is plagued with woes, from the state of the game to the quality of the bags in its collector's edition.

Loot boxes become a thing of the past

Robin: Though some of their stealthier forms might survive I think your run-of-the-mill loot boxes aren't long for this world. There's just too much scrutiny on them these days. If government regulation doesn't kill them, publisher skittishness will, and they'll end up banished to the same graveyard online passes got chucked in. The catch? I think they'll be replaced by something even more insidious.



Ray tracing at 4K and up is standard

Tyler: At the start of the '10s, people were complaining about not being able to read text on their SD TVs. In the decade that followed, 1080p became normal, and then 4K TVs became normal. Still, true 4K gaming (as in, no upscaling) is considered high-end today.

This is a boring, conservative prediction, but I'm going to say that'll happen again: 4K fully replaces 1080p and 1440p sometime in the '20s, and by the end of the decade, 8K and up are the high-end choices.

Riot usurps Blizzard's throne

Robin: Blizzard's fortunes have seemed increasingly shaky over the last couple of years – just when you thought the most unpopular thing they'd do in the decade was announce a mobile game, they decided to spark an international incident. Stories from inside the studio are troubling, too. Meanwhile, Riot's made its play, announcing a billion games and an entire multi-media empire in one press event.



FUTURE SHOCK

Our expert predictions for the decade to come: 2020-2030

PC hardware advances slow way down

Jarred: The fun prediction would be to assume Moore's Law is alive and well and computers continue to progress in leaps and bounds. The reality: we're hitting a wall. Actually, we've been hitting walls for the past decade, but each new wall becomes taller. Ten years ago, a state-of-the-

art CPU was manufactured on 45nm tech, and GPUs were on 55nm. We've gone through three or four transitions since then (32nm, 22nm, 14nm, and kind of 10nm for Intel; 40nm, 28nm, 16/12nm, and 7nm for TSMC). Ten years from now, I expect three transitions at most (eg, 5nm, 4nm, and 3nm), but the real improvements from each process shrink will become less noticeable. A Core i9-9900K or Ryzen 9 3900X will still be doing OK, but your graphics card will have been upgraded several times.

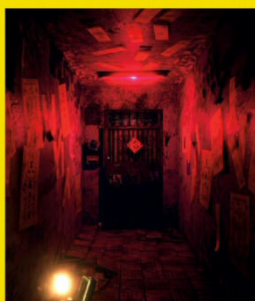
2019

JAN 10, 2019
BUNGIE SPLITS
WITH
ACTIVISION

The studio buys itself back from Activision, leaving the publisher and taking the rights to its MMO shooter *Destiny* with it.

FEB 24, 2019
DEVOTION
PULLED

Devotion is voluntarily taken down from Steam in the midst of a controversy around an insulting depiction of the leader of China.

JUNE 9, 2019
MICROSOFT
BUYS DOUBLE
FINE

The buying spree continues as it snaps up beloved indie studio Double Fine to join its new stable of first-party devs.





No One Lives Forever is finally saved from trademark hell

Wes: *NOLF* is one of those 'white whale' games, a stone cold 2000 classic shooter that has never been re-released digitally. Nightdive Studios, which saved *System Shock*, tried to rescue and update this spoof of '60s spy films, to no avail. It's apparently entangled in a mess of corporations who aren't sure what claim they have on the game. But dammit, that can't last forever. Sometime in the next decade, I think someone at Warner Bros (which bought *NOLF* developer Monolith) will cut through the bullshit and get this game on GOG and Steam where it belongs. And there will be much rejoicing.

The most popular game is from a genre we haven't even heard of yet

Tyler: Battle royale games didn't exist in 2010. Neither did autobattlers like *Dota Auto Chess*. Roguelikes were just starting to make a comeback as 'roguelites'. No one was using 'walking simulator' as a term of endearment or criticism. No one was searching for the term 'soulslike' until 2015. There were no 'strand games' that I can recall, because it's something Hideo Kojima made up. Only time will tell if he's on to something.



We won't buy PC games anymore

Harry: I'm not saying we're all just going to up and put down our mouse and keyboards en masse, but by the end of 2030, individually buying games to keep will just seem weird. Services like Xbox Game Pass for PC will be joined by others looking for a lucrative slice of the subscription-service pie. We'll be juggling various Game Pass-like products and never really own anything.



Dwarf Fortress dwarves become self-aware

Wes: *Dwarf Fortress* creator Tarn Adams has said he wants to simulate all the "narratively interesting" aspects of existence, and I'm betting that means we'll 100 per cent have a *Dwarf Fortress* Truman Show moment sometime in the next decade. Dwarves already have complex mental and emotional states, so it's not a leap to imagine them becoming self-aware enough to realise they're fictional beings inside a massive simulation. The question is, what will they do when they find out?

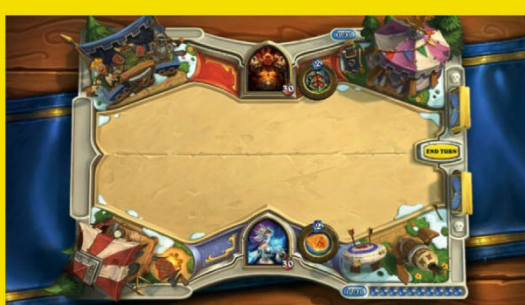
VR finally breaks through

Tyler: VR won't replace screens – that'd mean the death of popular genres, and be totally inaccessible for some – but by 2030 it will be much more popular. All-in-one headsets with built-in tracking will accurately detect the movements of our feet, hands and joints, as well as our facial expressions, making our Sonic meme avatars extremely lifelike.



OCT 6, 2019
BLITZCHUNG
SUSPENDED

Hearthstone pro Blitzchung speaks out in support of the Hong Kong protests – Blizzard suspends him and withholds his prize money.



OCT 13, 2019
THE END

Fortnite dominates mainstream -news cycles around the world simply by not being available to play for two days, ahead of its major Chapter 2 update.



OCT 15, 2019
DISCO ELYSIUM

Estonian developer ZA/UM's debut game launches to near-universal critical acclaim, even managing to secure our prestigious Game of the Year award.



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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Pixelated correctness

These days we're spoiled for ports, enjoying almost all of the fruits of the consoles' labours – and we generously share in return. But we can't pretend we've broken down our divisions entirely. There remains a certain *smell* to each game, regardless of what platform it finds itself on, that puts you in mind of either mice and keyboards or strange boxes under TVs.

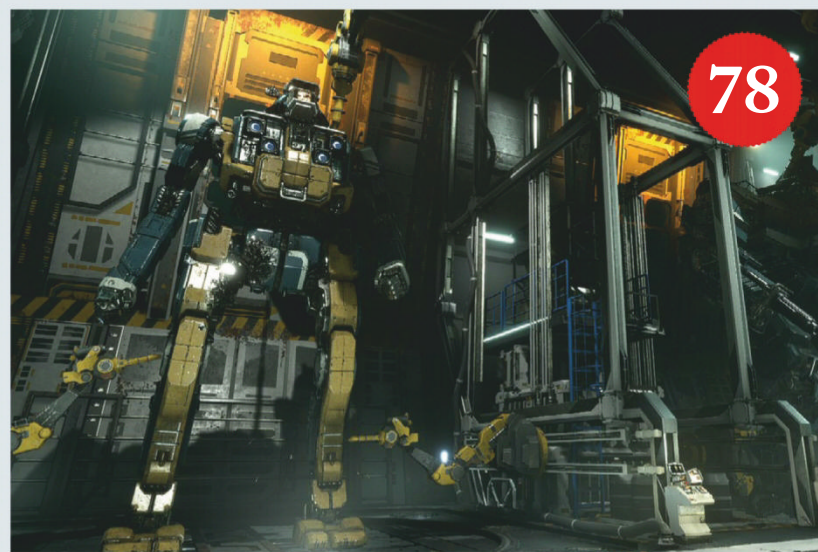
MechWarrior 5? That's a PC game down to its bones. The only thing chunkier than its mechs is its menus. *Phoenix Point?* Oh yes, that's a PC-ass PC game, elegantly combining our two great pillars of turn-based tactics and barely-contained jankiness. But *Shenmue 3?* Come on son – you can take a game off the Dreamcast, but you can't take the Dreamcast out of the game. Step carefully here.

ROBIN VALENTINE
MANAGING EDITOR

robin.valentine@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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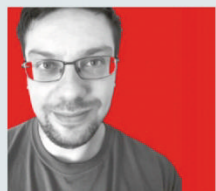
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This month's highly strategic reviewers...



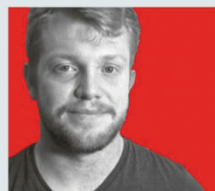
LUKE KEMP
Specialist in
Blood redistribution
Currently playing
Vampire: The Masquerade – Coteries of New York
This month
Found the longest game title ever.



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Forklift nostalgia
Currently playing
Shenmue III
This month
Wandered around a sleepy village not, as far as we can tell, doing much of anything.



DANIELLA LUCAS
Specialist in
Slime puns
Currently playing
Dragon Quest Builders 2
This month
Turned a pile of unassuming blocks into a sea of toilets.



ALISTAIR JONES
Specialist in
Brotherly love
Currently playing
Life is Strange 2
This month
Made the right choice, no matter how many times the game told him not to.



WES FENLON
Specialist in
Warthoggery
Currently playing
Halo: Reach
This month
Enjoyed the strangely illicit feeling of playing through a *Halo* game on Steam.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Getting spooked on the cheap
Currently playing
No Players Online
This month
Explored that most cursed of places: an empty server.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Good... timing
Currently playing
Quantum Break
This month
Travelled back to a time when it was apparently OK to put a TV show in a game.

VEXCOM

XCOM-like **PHOENIX POINT** brings great ideas to the formula, but tries for too much. *By Jonathan Bolding*

A terrible disease has overtaken mankind. The Pandoravirus, an alien threat that's mutating and twisting our world into one controlled by swarms of hybrid creatures emerging from the seas. Society has collapsed and new social movements have risen. A few rogue military operatives seek to revive an old initiative dedicated to securing the future. It will not be easy, as *Phoenix Point* chooses strategic complexity over tactical simplicity.

In this *Phoenix Point* is very much a successor to the original *X-COM* – unsurprisingly, as it's designed by series creator Julian Gollop. In terms of core design, turn-based tactics games don't get much better than *Phoenix Point*. To my chagrin, they also don't get much better than in terms of copious bugs and poor AI.

It's still heavily influenced by recent turn-based games. The design language of the interface will be very familiar to anyone who played a game released since Firaxis' *XCOM* or *XCOM 2*. Otherwise, *Phoenix Point* strikes off on its own path. It's a world of weird fiction monsters, heroic sci-fi soldiers, and the body horror they share. It has some wonderful visual design and well-established, consistent aesthetics throughout for a creepy and atmospheric ride. It's never quite clear where the worldbuilding is

taking you next – and it goes to some wonderfully weird places.

The sound design and music, on the other hand, are bad. They actively undercut everything the graphics accomplish. Some of the voice lines sound like they were recorded inside a tin can. The biggest, meanest alien beastie sounds like a 12-year-old imitating a tyrannosaurus rex. The music behind it all alternates between annoyingly shrill and

simply forgettable. But most of the time I didn't care at all. *Phoenix Point*'s campaign does fascinating things, centring core tensions you can never easily solve. Beginning with an aircraft and a handful of soldiers at a single remote base, you uncover the landscape of the ruined world and take on its problems. Exploring is key, as you need to quickly find and reactivate old Phoenix Project bases to expand

As you stretch out you encounter factions of people

NEED TO KNOW

- WHAT IS IT? Turn-based tactics against a tide of fishmen
- EXPECT TO PAY £36
- DEVELOPER Snapshot Games
- PUBLISHER In-house
- REVIEWED ON Intel Core i5-3330, GeForce GTX 1070 Ti, 8GB RAM
- MULTIPLAYER No
- LINK phoenixpoint.info

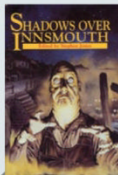
your capabilities – as well as caches of supplies and missions to do. As you stretch out you encounter factions of people divided into Havens, fortified settlements of a few thousand. You quickly realise that over 99 per cent of Earth's human population is gone. Now mists are rising from the oceans to claim the rest. To save them you'll have to pick sides. A few neutral Havens aside, the three human factions generally hate each other. New Jericho's billionaire leader wants to cleanse the world with fire. The Disciples of Anu worship mutation and want to leave humanity behind. Synedrion can't decide if they're an autonomous collective or an anarcho-syndicalist commune. Each group has novel ways of fighting the enemy, so allying with one over another earns you unique technology, but alienates the others. Despite the extinction-level threat, the factions are in fact so petty as to dislike that you've saved a few thousand of the others.

That's probably fine, because the tension on the strategic level is absolutely electric. You're always strapped for resources, deciding whether to send out an exploration team or hold them back to defend threatened Havens. It's a series of ever-more-vicious choices where expanding your own capabilities in the long term means deciding that Havens will fall in the short term. Eventually you're fielding dozens of soldiers across several teams, but you've expanded the scope of your operations to cover the globe, and it is never enough.

SLOG DAYS

Despite this frantic action, the overall path of the campaign is meandering. Figuring out how to progress takes a lot of swinging in the dark hoping some strategy lands. That's a slog in the mid-section of the campaign as you grind through missions looking for direction. It feels bad to need to play a campaign to understand how to play the campaign.

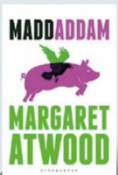
A LEGACY OF WEIRD *The weird fiction and sci-fi influences that give us Phoenix Point*



THE SHADOW OVER INNSMOUTH
H.P. Lovecraft's cosmic tale brings hybrid fishmen and an invasion up from the depths.



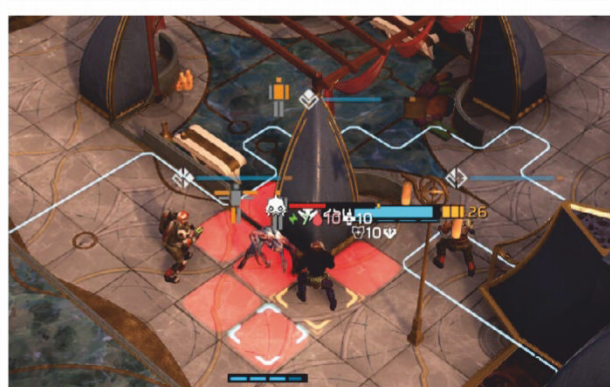
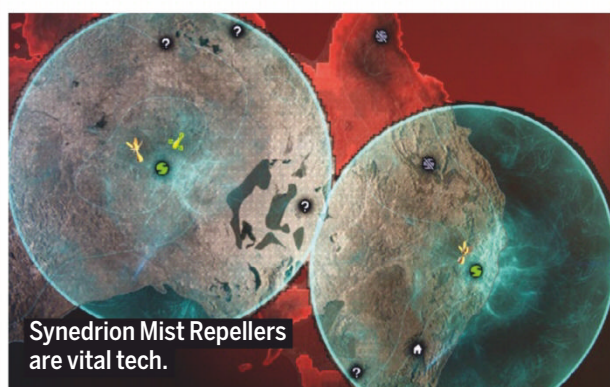
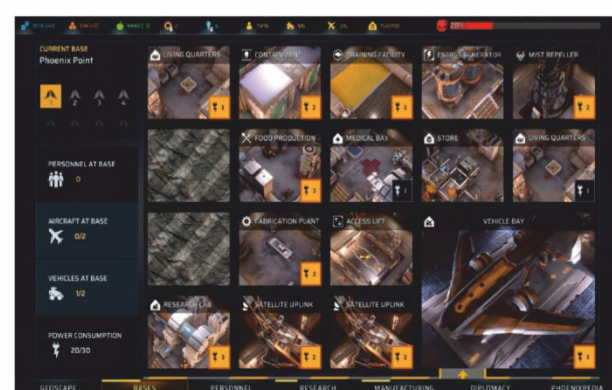
THE THING (1982)
Twisted mutant heads and insidious gestalt organisms all make appearances in *Phoenix Point*.



CLI-FI
Novels like the MaddAddam trilogy portray a world ruined first by climate change, then by human genetic tampering.



XCOM: TERROR FROM THE DEEP
Fishy aliens colonise the depths of the ocean, then start blowing things up. Strikingly similar, this one.





But the tactical battles only lag through pure repetition, not out of a lack of interesting toys to play with. There are six classes, each with unique abilities and equipment. Each soldier also has three stats: Strength for HP and inventory, Speed for movement, and Willpower for morale. Stats and powers are simple, but spending points to advance is rife with hard decisions. Conversely, new weapons and equipment are often measured tradeoffs rather than obvious upgrades.

These tradeoffs play into the strategy you develop around your forces. *Phoenix Point*'s tactical combat is about simulated bullets, hundreds of hit points, hit locations, overlapping fields of fire, and careful movement. A solid strategy going into the fight will always prove better than tactics turn-by-turn... mostly. The balance isn't entirely there. Willpower is spent to use abilities, a frustrating impetus to not use your cool tricks lest your team collapse into a spiral of panicking soldiers. Unless, of course, you can find a way to spend all your willpower that leaves your enemies dead. Focus-fire strategies based around doing massive damage quickly can dominate, as can abusing action-free movement to zoom around.

Those few abuses aside, your soldiers' precious action points are a resource spent in miserly increments. The semi-realistic ballistic physics model each shot rather than binary hit or miss attack rolls. You can automate shooting or take direct control and aim it yourself. It seems like a gimmick, but in play it really won me over. There's no feeling quite like shooting off an enemy's arm so they drop their shotgun.

Physics extends to the world too.

It's all modelled with various kinds of hardness. A wall of corrugated metal won't protect you for long, but a concrete blockhouse is a fortress. Cover is destructible, and since you can free-aim your soldiers'

weapons I found heavy cannons and machine guns very useful at times. That said, there's no elaborate environmental destruction going on. Terrain pieces break apart, PhysX about for a moment, then vanish. You will see object hitboxes that don't quite line up with the models,

The semi-realistic ballistic physics model each shot

soldiers on auto-aim shooting into adjacent stair rails, and crabmen huddling behind trash cans.

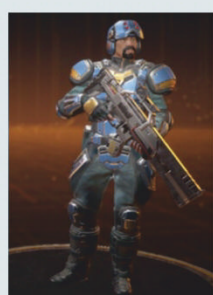
Speaking of aquatic horrors, *Phoenix Point*'s population of beasts is quite good – though limited. In lieu of varied enemies, the Pandoravirus instead cooks up a wide panoply of

new weapons. As the campaign continues enemies get tougher and gain new abilities. Arthron crabmen start nearly unarmored but gain thick shells, grenade launchers, and poison spit. Triton fishmen are four-

armed: two for carrying human weapons, two for jellyfish tentacles or bloodsucking maws. Supposedly these upgrades and evolutions are procedural, based on how you fight the enemy, but if so it wasn't obvious. There are also human opponents from the three factions and some

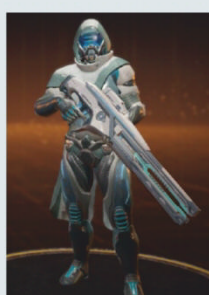
STAY CLASSY

The core and specialist classes that can be recruited to the project



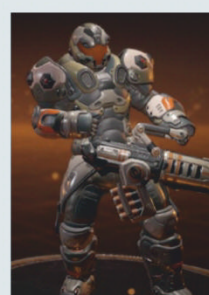
ASSAULT

The workhorse kill-scoring soldier. Every team needs at least two. Later, they can swap inventory items at no action cost.



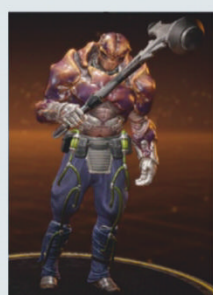
MARKSMAN

Effective at range, deadly to weak targets, and great at neutralising enemies by tactically removing their limbs.



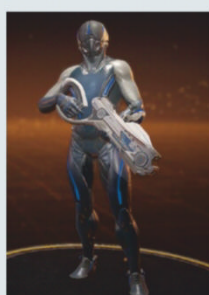
HEAVY

The name describes both their armour and weapons. Very slow, but can reposition with a sweet jetpack.



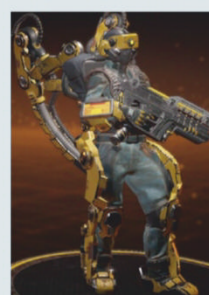
BERSERKER

Disciples of Anu field the only melee specialist. Unlike that other game, they're on your side. Hits like a freight train.



INFILTRATOR

Synedrion specialists can stealth around. Disruptive flankers with poison and stun powers, but very fragile.



TECHNICIAN

New Jericho's specialist is a support character limited only by the action economy. Can deploy very deadly turrets.

post-apocalyptic raiders. They also get upgrades as their faction researches new stuff.

SIRENS' CALL

A real highlight are the minibosses, Sirens, who are both heavily armoured and can mind-control. I loved every time one appeared, throwing the tactical situation into chaos as I both managed existing enemies and mitigated the new threat. The boss fights against the huge Scylla fall flat though. They should be tactically interesting, as they boast all kinds of powers, but are actually just about pouring every bullet you have into one large thing.

Undercutting all the cool design is the combat AI. It's competent at best, but at least once a fight downright broken. It fails at simple, vital tasks like setting up effective overwatch fire – sometimes directly away from you or into a wall. I once saw a fishman spend its whole turn running full tilt to the top of a three-story building. The fishman then immediately used its precious Will points to activate the dash ability, leaping off the side of the building and landing two spaces from where it started... now out of cover. *Phoenix Point* also hangs during enemy turns, sometimes for as much as a minute, before deciding what to do next. Twice during my play it hung and then never resumed.

Those two moments aside, *Phoenix Point* isn't broken, just buggy. I never encountered anything game-ruining, or that wasn't fixed with a reloaded save. It never outright crashed on me, nor did it have visual glitches. It loaded quickly enough from an SSD, but slowly from an HDD. I did have problems with soldier abilities working only sometimes, with a character refusing to do anything for a turn.

Despite shortcomings, *Phoenix Point* won me over. It's a bit of a mess, but it's a mess filled with clever ideas and idiosyncratic gameplay you won't find anywhere else. Put *XCOM: Apocalypse* and *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* into a blender and you get *Phoenix Point*. But someone's put a cup of roaches in there too. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Although it is strategically delicious, *Phoenix Point*'s biggest problem is the lackluster technical execution.

77

COUNT ME IN

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – COTERIES OF NEW YORK ain't too bat. *By Luke Kemp*

If you thought being a vampire was all about theatrical capes and indeterminate East European accents, think again. It is in fact all about the Masquerade, which basically means abiding by a set of strict rules that hide the existence of vampires from boring old humans. This is just one thing you'll have to keep in mind throughout your time with this game, a memorable visual novel that, while very good, has a few fangs holding it back from greatness.

Coteries of New York, in a way, occupies a sweet spot between the series' tabletop roots and the videogames that followed. It enjoys the immediacy of videogames, shedding the need to learn rules and orchestrate the schedules of friends associated with the tabletop experience. Conversely, the visual novel format means that the pace is dictated by the player, something that isn't always possible in the legendary *Bloodlines*.

The game begins as it means to go on – with a choice. You can play as a character from clan Brujah (Hulk-like physical prowess), clan Toreador (super speed and supernatural senses), or clan Ventrue (mind control and enhanced resilience). All three clans can terrify or sexually attract the puny humans around you. You get to choose your character's name too, of course; and so, on my first run through, my vampire is Kevin of clan Brujah.

Poor old Kevin. Still reeling from a painful breakup, he thinks he's going to get some sexy time with a pretty lady, but instead he finds out that she's a pain in the neck. Literally. I give this minor spoiler for two

reasons. Firstly, I'm pretty sure you'll see it coming anyway. In fact, I think the only people who won't see this coming are people who have never heard of vampires before. Secondly, I was slightly disappointed to find

that the basic setup of the intro is the same regardless of who you pick. Meet mysteriously attractive stranger, become a vampire, dive into the story.

KINDRED SPIRITS

This isn't indicative of poor writing, though. Far from it. Any example of the visual novel genre lives or dies on its script, and there's some very sharp wordage on display here. The Masquerade story is, of course, one of vampires preying on humans. However, it's also a story of

There's some very sharp wordage on display here

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A visual novel that proves blood is thicker and tastier than water

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.49

DEVELOPER
Draw Distance

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/36rjEM1

backstabbing politics, uneasy alliances, and – to an extent that makes the world interesting – isolation and humanity.

Although nothing worth talking about is done to describe your character's life prior to pointy teeth, a palpable sense of detachment from normal life is generated. Each character you meet, too, leaps from the screen and into your imagination despite being represented by a static (but very well drawn) portrait.

As the story runs smoothly on, I feel a need. A need for feed... ing. As a vampire, I need to get me some of that sweet, sweet blood on a fairly regular basis. The more feeding opportunities I ignore, the more I tempt the Beast – an internal, primal vampiric form that shreds my remaining humanity – to emerge. If I become too hungry, certain story options will be blocked off to me... or will become available.

The truth is that, contrary to appearances, very few choices have meaningful consequences. Most of the time, making the 'wrong' choice means little more than upsetting the person you're talking to for a paragraph or two, before they revert to the dialogue they would've jumped straight to if you'd pleased them.

Then there's the bizarre save system. The only way to save is to exit the game through the menu. So, if the game crashes (which happened to me twice), you lose all progress since your last save. Odder still, each time the credits roll the game deletes my save, which is painful when I test out whether making an obviously stupid choice at a fairly early stage results in death (it does).

Nonetheless, the game holds me in its power, and I happily submit to its seductive charms. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Excellent writing and vibrant characters summon forgiveness for prominent technical issues and repetition.

77

FANGS VERY MUCH

Your sire, Sophie Langley

1 Staring out of the window, clearly a complicated soul.

2 Sometimes, an ellipsis says more than mere words ever could.

3 Immaculate hair, a sure sign of wealth.

4 You can't see them, but the fanged teeth are in there.



SOPHIE

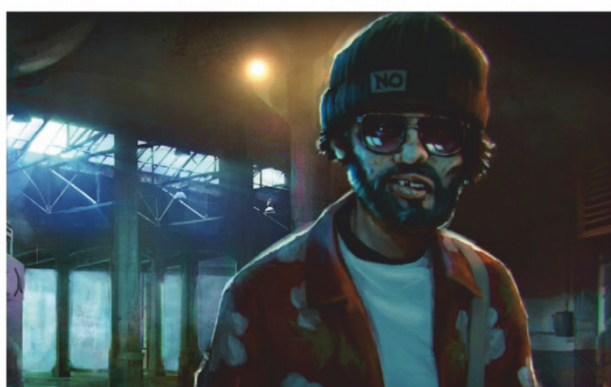
Apologies. Old habits die hard. Clearly, some stick with you even after your death.

CONTINUE

Those things will ki... um, never mind.



There's a great cast of characters.



'Art Hole'. Hur hur hur.

You approach a nice looking building that houses a two-story gallery called The Art Hole. Two large men in suits flank the door on both sides, and they give your companion a nod as you approach.

CONTINUE



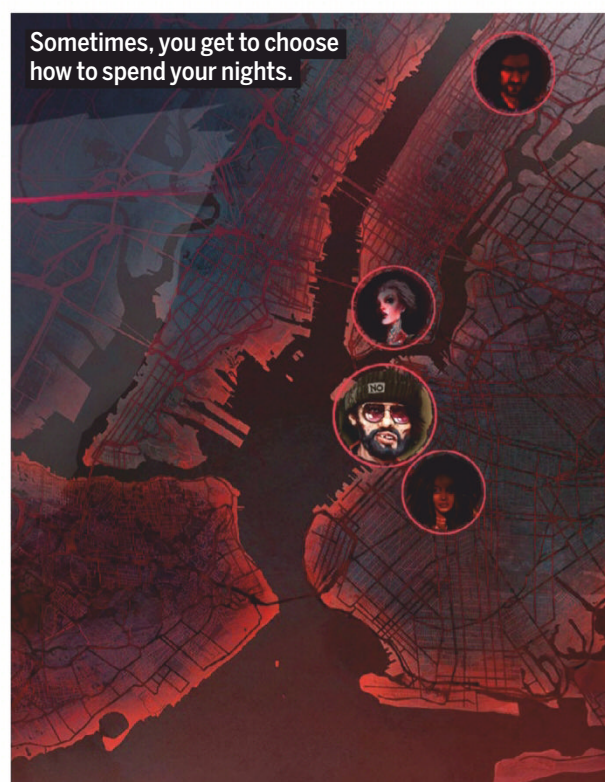
TENNIS PLAYER

Good evening...?

CONTINUE

It is now, hotshot.

Sometimes, you get to choose how to spend your nights.



FIGHTING FIT

SHENMUE 3 is as flawed as it is wonderful, and I wouldn't have it any other way. *By Andy Kelly*

Nestled in the mist-shrouded mountains of rural China, Bailu Village is a settlement frozen in time. People live slow lives here among rice paddies, ornate Buddhist temples, quaint cottages, and fields of colourful wildflowers. There are some clues that *Shenmue 3* is set in the 1980s – a woman's oversized glasses, a bleepy arcade game – but otherwise life here has changed very little in the past hundred years.

It's an ideal setting for a *Shenmue* game, a series famous (or perhaps infamous) for its languid, aggressively deliberate pacing. This is a game as slow and meandering as the old man strolling through Bailu's marketplace deciding which kind of steamed bun to have for lunch. And the village's steadfast resistance to a changing world, to the creep of modernisation, neatly reflects *Shenmue 3*'s position itself.

This unlikely sequel sticks so closely to the formula of the first two games that it's almost as if the last 18 years of game design never happened. And honestly, as a fan, I couldn't be happier. From its earliest days the *Shenmue* series has been divisive, with opinion rarely falling in the middle. You either think it's an emotional, groundbreaking masterpiece or an indulgent, clunky mess. There's no in-between.

If you belong to the latter camp, I'll come right out and say it: *Shenmue 3* won't change your mind.

From its earliest days the *Shenmue* series has been divisive

At all. The passage of time has only heightened the things that people criticise it for. The cumbersome controls, the abundance of cutscenes, the QTEs, the aching slowness of everything. But if you love these games for their idiosyncrasies, indefinable charm, sense of place and warmth, this is really as perfect a continuation of the series as you could hope for – with a few caveats.

The important thing is that it is, in every way, a true *Shenmue* game: a sentiment you'll find either deeply off-putting or massively exciting.

It's been 18 years since *Shenmue 2* was released, but the third game picks up immediately where it left off. Japanese teenager Ryo Hazuki is desperately searching for the man who killed his father, a journey that has taken him from his hometown of Yokosuka to this mountain village. Central to *Shenmue*'s plot are a pair of ancient artefacts, the Phoenix

NEED TO KNOW

- WHAT IS IT? A martial arts adventure set in 1980s China
- EXPECT TO PAY £45
- DEVELOPER Ys Net
- PUBLISHER Deep Silver
- REVIEWED ON GTX 1080, i7-9700K, 16GB RAM
- MULTIPLAYER No
- LINK shenmue.link

Mirror and the Dragon Mirror, which are deeply connected to both Bailu and the murder of Ryo's father.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Shenmue is, essentially, a detective game. You spend the majority of your time talking to people, asking questions, finding clues, and pulling on threads until the next piece of the puzzle reveals itself. Occasionally things turn violent and Ryo is forced to fight, either through QTEs or combo-based martial arts combat. But mostly it's just walking and talking, with some life simulation thrown in for good measure. You can chop wood or drive forklifts to earn money, eat food to restore stamina, or train at dojos to level up your skills.

It's not all work and self improvement. You can gamble, betting on racing turtles and, yes, Lucky Hit. Or you can visit the arcade and play some games, which are fun but not a patch on the arcades from the Sega-published entries in the series. There's no *Hang On* or *Space Harrier* here, sadly. There are herbs to pick and sell, capsule toys to collect and fish to catch. In a game where events don't trigger till certain times of day, these are a useful distraction. But they're equally handy if you just want to take a break from the story and enjoy yourself a little.

When you first arrive in Bailu people are cold and wary, even refusing to answer your questions in some cases. There's a real feeling of being an outsider, which makes sense in an isolated community like this. But over time, as you get to know the villagers, they get to know you as well. You can sense them warming to you, opening themselves up. Eventually Ryo will address people by name when you start a conversation and they'll comment on things you've done around the village.

There's a genuine sense of community in *Shenmue 3* and the more I played it, the more Bailu started to feel like home. Similar to Yokosuka in the first game, there's

ARCADE FIRE *Ways to waste time in Shenmue 3*



1 GACHAPON Collect a full set of these capsule toys and you can sell it, but beware: every machine has a rare toy and the chance of getting it is slim.



2 LUCKY HIT A returning favourite from *Shenmue 2*. Drop a ball, watch it bounce off pins, then hope it lands in the area marked with a circle for a prize.



3 FROG RACING Which of these frogs is the fastest? It's a question for the ages. And if you bet on the right one you can make a decent chunk of money.



4 CHOBU-CHAN FIGHTER No classic Sega games in *Shenmue 3*'s arcades, unfortunately. There is, however, a rubbish penguin beat-'em-up.

It's Ryo! And he hasn't aged a day in 18 years.



There are plenty of things to do in Bailu Village.



You'll eventually win over the village community.

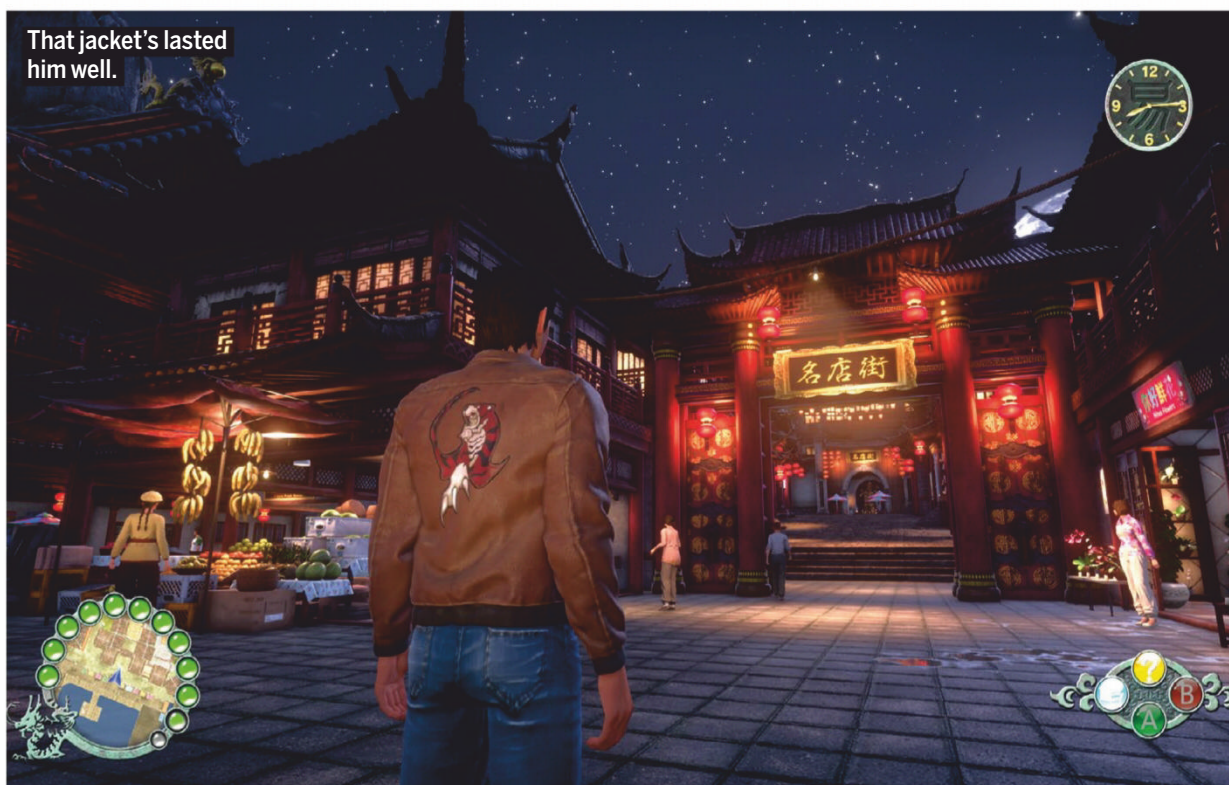
It's a tiny toy to add to your collection.



Shenhua soon becomes a firm friend.



That jacket's lasted him well.



Enjoy the nightlife.



» something magical about getting to know a place, its people and its routines. At night you'll see Wang and Liu, the village watchmen, retreat to the Drunken Panda pub for a beer or three. In the afternoons you'll find Lei, a young trainee martial artist, practising his form in the grounds of the local temple.

Bailu feels like a place, not just a movie set, and when it was time to move on in the story I was genuinely sad to leave it behind. It's clear *Shenmue 3* is a relatively low budget game, with visuals that feel slightly sterile. Even so, Bailu is gorgeous to look at, its evocative art design triumphing over its technical limitations. At night the sky floods with stars and moonlight falls over the cottages, smoke billowing from their chimneys, lights glowing warmly inside. By day it's all butterflies, blooming flowers and bright blue skies. It's just incredibly cosy, a tradition I'm glad to see the third game continue.

Joining you this time is Shenhua, a local girl whose father has gone missing and whose fate seems somehow entwined with Ryo's. We've always had allies in this series, whether it's Guizhang in the original or Ren in the sequel, but they usually take a back seat, conveniently appearing when you're in trouble. But in this game Shenhua is much more of a companion, frequently accompanying Ryo into the village as he pursues his next line of inquiry. People in the village can be more cooperative with Shenhua in tow. And because Ryo is staying at her house you speak to her every night before bed, catching up on the day's events and planning your next move.

It's wonderful watching their relationship blossom. Over the hearth they'll ask each other questions about their lives, hopes and regrets, and in these moments we see a new side to Ryo. He's always been a closed book, rarely expressing himself – even to people who care for him. But somehow Shenhua manages to tease his feelings out and it's heartwarming to hear him talk about his life in Japan and fondly reminisce about his friends and loved ones.

It turns out that Ryo is pretty deep when you get past that stoic facade, which was a pleasant surprise. He

GLOBE TROTTER

Ryo Hazuki's journey so far



1 YOKOSUKA A city located about 40 miles south of Tokyo and the hometown of Ryo. The first game is set here, mostly on Dobuita Street: a real-life shopping district that you can still find today.

2 HONG KONG In the second game Ryo follows Lan Di to Hong Kong, a city where he feels out of his depth. Later he travels to Kowloon Walled City, a cramped, lawless city within a city.

3 GUILIN Hot on Lan Di's trail, Ryo ends up in Guilin, a mountainous region of China. Here he finds the cave where the stone for the Phoenix Mirror was quarried and meets a new ally.

has layers and it's a joy to see them being peeled away.

At a certain point in the story, Ryo and Shenhua leave the relative safety of Bailu behind and find themselves in Niaowu, a bustling port city that suddenly and massively increases the scale of the game. After hours spent in the close-knit, pastoral Bailu

Village, stepping off the boat here is a real shock to the system. It's beautiful too, especially at night, with glowing lanterns and traditional Chinese architecture. Niaowu is huge and a thrilling change of scenery,

recalling the stark contrast of Yokosuka and Hong Kong in the original games. The story also picks up here, although I say that in relative terms; it's extremely slow.

Here's the thing: despite waiting almost two decades for a conclusion to Ryo Hazuki's story, this isn't it. Creator Yu Suzuki always intended *Shenmue* to be at least a five-part series, and I have to admire him sticking to his guns. That said, I was expecting a little more in terms of pushing the story forward from this sequel – although there are some big revelations, as well as a few smaller ones that fans will get a kick out of. Ever wondered what Tom the hot dog vendor from Dobuita Street is up to these days? Or how Nozomi is getting on in Canada? *Shenmue 3*

answers some of these lingering series questions in a satisfying way.

So it's clear I really enjoyed my time with *Shenmue 3*, but I do have a few gripes. Design-wise, some of the character models are comically inconsistent. You'll talk to a relatively normal, human-looking NPC one minute, then some kind of exaggerated, hideous caricature the next. It's like they're from different games. There are also a few points in the story where you have to raise a big chunk of money, which means the narrative grinds to a halt as you spend days splitting logs, gambling, or shifting crates around. And I found having to buy and eat food to keep my stamina up a little like needless busywork at times, especially when I absent-mindedly stumbled into a fight with half a health bar because I'd been sprinting around too much.

SLOW LANE

One complaint I don't have, however, is with the slow pace. Some people will undoubtedly find it maddening, especially when they play it for an hour and achieve basically nothing. But I really do love the lazy, laid back rhythm of the game. It's hypnotic and absorbing like nothing else on PC, perfectly recapturing the strange, sedate, melancholy magic of the original games. Wise old masters are forever telling Ryo to slow down, to have patience, to resist the urge to rush headlong into a confrontation with Lan Di. And honestly, it's advice that anyone playing *Shenmue 3* should take to heart.

Take a stroll through the wildflowers and pick some herbs. Shoot the breeze at the bridge leading into the village. Work on your capsule toy collection. Tell Shenhua about growing up in Japan. In an increasingly loud and relentless world, *Shenmue 3* is an ocean of calm. Step back into 1980s China and just go with the flow. That's when that curious, hard to define *Shenmue* magic emerges and you find yourself entranced by it. Will Yu Suzuki ever finish his story? I'm not sure, but being invited back into his world is a rare treat we may never experience again. So may as well savour it, eh? ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A seamless continuation of the series that makes up for its limitations with pure heart. It's like Ryo never left us.

83

Take a stroll through the wildflowers and pick some herbs

STOP: HAMMER TIME

DRAGON QUEST BUILDERS 2's lighthearted frolics hide a deep RPG. *By Daniella Lucas*

Despite having an entire island as my building playground to shape how I please, I'm spending most of my time making bathrooms. Washrooms, spas, shared toilets – there's a lot to choose from, and each one makes my citizens burst with happiness (which I can then spend to unlock more things to make even more bathrooms). *Dragon Quest Builders 2* is as weird as it is delightful – and a very different beast to the main series.

The world needs saving and there are goofy Slimes to bash, but here you're more Bob the Builder than dashing swordsman. This quirky offshoot sees you go from building basic bedrooms and kitchens to help people survive in dire times, to constructing elaborate castles and giant magical trees, all in the name of defeating the evil Children of Hargon. After inheriting a deserted island from a hairy mole-thing with a hammer and befriending a chap that likes hitting things a little too much you start about your task of creating your own kingdom. But you'll need more people and resources to do that, so off you pop to different islands, solving the issues there before returning with everything you've learned and plenty of materials.

The game is mostly split into two halves: your time on the Isle of Awakening when you can do whatever you want, be that creating

cities, sculpting blocky statues in your own image, or, in my case, building a multiplex of bathrooms, and your time investigating other islands where you'll help people out with quests and more specific builds.

There's a hell of a lot of block types to keep things fresh

It's a great mix of freebuilding with just enough direction to help you make some impressive-looking stuff. For most quests you'll be given a rough room recipe – a pot and a towel rail will make a toilet, a chest

and some bonfires will make a kitchen – but you can shape them however you please. There's a hell of a lot of block types to keep things fresh so even if you decide to build ten restaurants in a row there are enough blocks to keep them varied.

There's also an absolutely massive RPG story here full of peril and plot twists that ties into the original *Dragon Quest II* on the NES. Set 'some time' after the events of the game, the Children of Hargon seek to

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A creative building RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1070,
i7-7700, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 4 players

LINK
bit.ly/2E6haGy

destroy the world by summoning a demon. Their appetite for destruction is so ravenous that creating anything is considered heresy. That's where you, the legendary builder, step in to rebuild forgotten settlements and restore peace. It's full of traditional fantasy fare, but it's told with humour and some excellently written character dialogue.

The port job is fine. There are a few basic graphical options and it runs smoothly, but there's not much room to customise your experience.

SLIME SPREE

My one complaint is that the pacing gets a little odd sometimes. About halfway through you'll reach a section that you're stuck on until you complete it – no being able to switch to the freebuilding of the Isle Of Awakening or accessing the multiplayer. It's not bad, it's just a strange choice when you've had so much freedom. Although the mandatory stealth section can do one – why is it in a building game?!

Calling *Dragon Quest Builders 2* a *Minecraft* clone is a disservice. Yes, they're both block-based building games, but *DQB2's* story gives all of your building purpose. You might not be able to craft circuitry, but at least the furniture looks like something you can use rather than wool, trapdoors and guesswork slapped together. By having so many individual items, *DQB2* feels way more polished. It's also easier to make something that looks good even if you don't feel creative. There's always going to be that person who can somehow create entire cities out of perfectly coordinated blocks, but you can take pride in your simple square bedrooms and toilets when all of the pieces fit together so nicely. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Dragon Quest Builders 2 is lighthearted with plenty of opportunities for creative building and a surprisingly solid story.

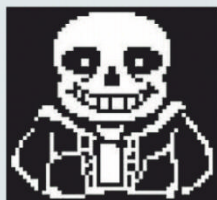
84

GAMING'S TOP 5 HAPPIEST MONSTERS

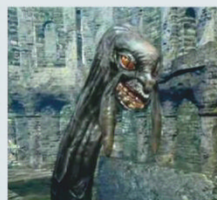
What are they smiling about?



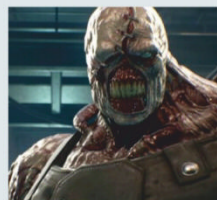
DRAGON QUEST SLIME
These guys are just having the slime of their life and feeling goo-reat!



UNDERTALE SANS
His own terrible puns tickle his funny bone. (Which isn't actually bone.)



DARK SOULS FRAMPT
Happy because he's covered by the Lordran dental plan. Lucky!



RESI 3 NEMESIS
He only smiles because he has no lips, his life is actually very sad.



DUNGEON KEEPER HORNED REAPER
Having a dungeon and no morals is a barrel of laughs.



OK COMPUTER GAME

Wallowing in day-to-day drudgery
in **MOSAIC**. By Alex Spencer

You wake up. You grab your phone to switch off the alarm, then stare at it until you're late for work. You brush your teeth, making eye contact in the bathroom mirror with the hollowed-out thing you've become. As game loops go, it's not exactly shoot, reposition, reload, is it? But then, this is *Mosaic's* sales pitch: forget the straightforward thrills of action and/or adventure, here's a game that simulates the tedious grind of everyday life.

Using point-and-click controls, you drag your character – an anonymous office worker with a wonky tie, a smartphone and not much else in the way of a discernible personality – through this loop five times, a full working week of low-level misery. Which raises the question: why exactly would you want a second life that's just as rubbish as the first?

If *Mosaic* was able to answer for itself, I suspect it'd be a mumble about art and mirrors and reflecting reality. And there are some sharply observed moments here, like the daily elevator ride you share with two strangers. Seemingly the only control you have over your character is which way he looks – so much as glance in a stranger's direction, and they'll do everything they can to avoid meeting your gaze. At which point, you realise there is a second thing you can do: look at your phone.

This is the big message *Mosaic* has to impart: Modern life, eh? We're all

scared of one another and we're always looking at our screens. It's not wrong but I'm not sure it ever cuts any deeper than that classic one-tweet Black Mirror synopsis: 'What if phones, but too much?'

The overall effect is of a well-made Radiohead fan video

SCREEN TIME

This does mean *Mosaic* has more to say than most games. But it feels thin here because the entire game is just a housing for this message. *Mosaic* is a point-and-click

adventure, but I use that last word under advisement. There are no real puzzles to speak of, or gags and insights to be accessed by clicking on background details. For the most part, you just move through the story.

There are exceptions, mind. Every day when you arrive at work, *Mosaic* switches to a very simple hex-based strategy game. It's half-baked, but possibly intentionally so – work isn't supposed to be fun, after all. Outside of the office, there's the occasional bright spot to be found along your

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A point-and-click mundanity simulator with a strong visual style

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.50

DEVELOPER
Krillbite Studio

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

REVIEWED ON
Radeon RX 580, AMD Ryzen 5 2600 3.9GHz, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK
mosaiccorp.biz

commute: watching a butterfly or sinking into your own imagination. These moments are presented as off the beaten path, and some of them even are, toying with those well-trained gamer instincts that, if you're supposed to go right, you should try heading left first.

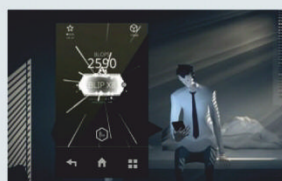
Your efforts will be rewarded with a brief bit of striking imagery: yer man floating in a sunset, miles away from the grey tones of real life, or fantasising about an office complex crumbling like the end of *Fight Club*. If I had to make a case for the monotonous second life of *Mosaic*, these would be my Exhibit A.

Because this is an undeniably eye-catching game. *Mosaic's* house style is minimalist: limited palette, deliberately low-poly models, a smooth blank where everyone except your character's face should be. And vitally, the game is willing to break those rules, messing with the shape of your character or casting dusty sunbeams, or just introducing some damned colour to proceedings.

The overall effect is of a particularly well-made Radiohead fan video. As someone who spent most of their teens on long meaningful walks with Kid A in the headphones, I don't even necessarily mean that as a bad thing. But it might grate on you. There's an eagerness, in *Mosaic's* presentation and its experiments with repetition, to constantly remind you that 'This Is Art, Actually', while its grand thematic underpinnings could fit into a tweet.

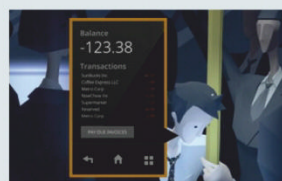
So you might consider that question, why you'd want to live someone else's tedious life and conclude that, frankly, you don't. And you wouldn't be wrong, exactly. But *Mosaic* is at least an occasionally fascinating way of boring yourself. ■

ON THE PHONE *How to distract yourself from real life, the Mosaic way*



BLIPBLOP

A clicker game with all its theming ripped out to expose the inner workings. But somehow, watching numbers get bigger is still compelling.



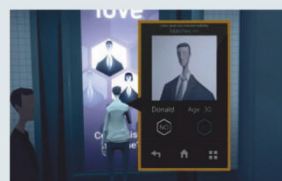
BANK

Scan a list of transactions you don't fully remember making! Find out just how overdrawn you are! Fail to pay your bills! All the features of a real-life app.



BLIPCOIN

A surely foolproof way of paying off that overdraft: buy a load of cryptocurrency at a low price and wait for the graph to climb back... oh.



LOVE

Swipe through an endless supply of identikit men, picking which faceless drones you find attractive, and never hear anything back either way.

PC GAMER VERDICT

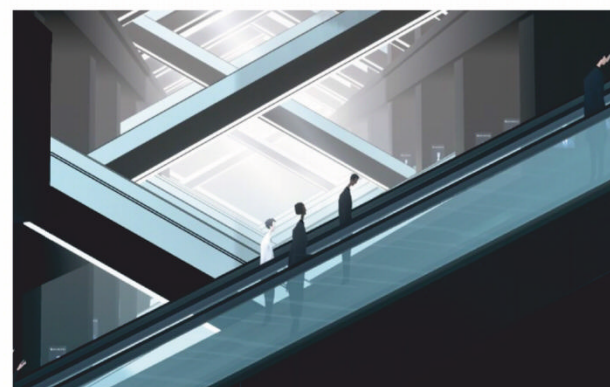
A game about breaking free from monotony that gets, perhaps inevitably, a little monotonous.

61

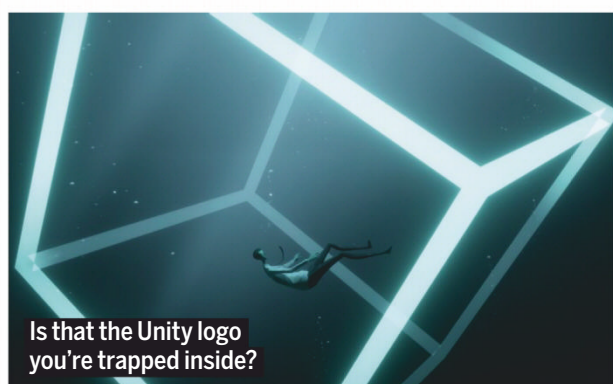
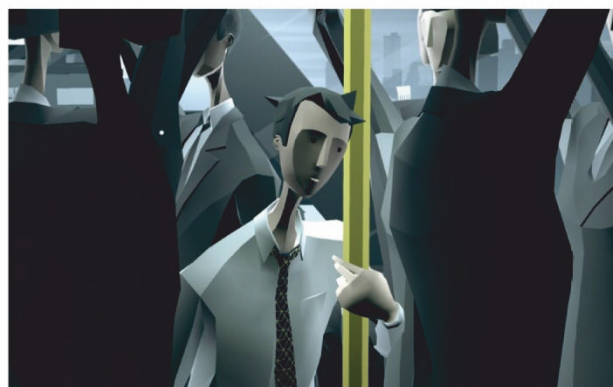
Bright or bleak, *Mosaic* is capable of some stunning images.



Moving around means holding down the mouse button. A lot.



The office-job minigame feels like a savage attack on strategy games.



Is that the Unity logo you're trapped inside?



Ahh, music, giver of life, summoner of magical fish.

MEAT VS METAL

MECHWARRIOR 5: MERCENARIES is the solid return of a beloved sim series. *By Jon Bolding*

This throwback mech sim honours the 30-year *MechWarrior* legacy very closely: in mechanics, in controls, and even in soundtrack. Bombastic guitar riffs thunder over every combat, lasers sizzle, PPCs crackle, and gauss rifles make that weird ‘pew’ noise, you know the one. Mechs stomp and break and explode spectacularly, levelling buildings around them. In short: *MechWarrior* is extremely back.

Not everything about *MW5* is rooted in the past. The overall aesthetic fits into the contemporary look of the *BattleTech* universe. The UI is clean, inspired by the work that went into Harebrained Schemes’ interface for 2018’s *BattleTech*.

Piranha’s modern mech designs are memorable updates to the dated ’80s designs. They stomp menacingly at each other across a pretty diverse set of battlefields that sit starkly opposed to the near-featureless plains of the *MechWarrior* past. It also brings in your friends in a co-op mode, both for campaign and one-off skirmishes, that is both stable and tactically rich. It runs pretty well aside from one glitchy randomly-generated mission and some chug on mission starts.

The game is an interstellar sandbox about running a company of mercenary mech pilots and pursuing some casual revenge. It’s a campaign mode that really plays into the themes of the setting, ones of scarcity and technological regression, the so-called LosTech. It often forces you to make hard choices about how to

re-arm a mech when you can’t find a replacement part – or simply sell the whole thing when it’ll be too time-consuming and expensive to repair. Budgeting decisions can leave you strapped for cash, choosing

between new mechs or top-tier guns for the mechs you have. The big space campaign map is really just a vehicle for a simple, tight, and effective loop: travel to a new conflict zone, pick a mission and ruin your

mechs in combat, find a sidequest to accept, head to some industrial worlds to rearm and repair, then head back out to your new mission.

The feeling of dropping into those missions is superb. Your ‘lance’ of mechs – yourself and up to three others, controlled by friends online or AI pilots – rotates into position, red lights strobing in the cavernous maintenance bay of your mercenary company’s Leopard drop ship. Your pilot’s hands move across the console to punch a boot-up sequence and grip controls. The doors in front of you crack open as the startup sequence completes and the iconic lines sound:

The feeling of dropping into those missions is superb

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Giant robot combat simulator in a storied franchise

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Piranha Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-3330, GeForce GTX 1070 Ti, 8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Co-op only

LINK
mw5mercs.com

REACTORS, ONLINE. SENSORS, ONLINE. WEAPONS, ONLINE. ALL SYSTEMS... NOMINAL. Your mech strides onto the battlefield – sometimes to a calm forest morning, others into raging streams of laser fire. The missions are chosen from only a few types, but they’re always different because each battlefield is procedurally generated and then sprinkled with objectives. Navigating cramped canyons on a Mars-like world is a very different feel from being utterly exposed on a rolling plain of wheat. There are also bespoke campaign missions of varying quality, from clumsy and linear to interestingly open-ended.

MECH MY DAY

The mechs are a pleasure to handle, and the core experience of combat really takes advantage of the map as a centrepiece. Mechs stomp around, faster or slower as you throttle up and down – throttle and orientation control are a key part of the simulator-style play here. Twisting your torso to strafe targets and show strong armour to the enemy is key, as is knowing the layout of weapons on your mech – lasers situated high might shoot over a wall, while those slung on low arms will just explode the cover you were using. Fights in *MechWarrior 5* feel intensely physical as your mech slows to scale inclines or ploughs through a row of parked cars. Lasers rake across woods to follow a target and leave a trail of falling, burning trees in their wake. Watching mechs smash into destructible terrain is great, for instance when a dodging mech shoulder checks a building and obliterates the facade.

Of course, the smashing isn’t always on purpose. The AI of both your enemies and teammates is relatively functional but often comically inept at understanding the terrain. Allies will casually smash whatever you’re supposed to defend or launch missiles into cliffsides. Or, my personal favourite, be reduced to

LORDS OF WAR BattleTech’s noble houses



HOUSE MARIK
The Free Worlds League. Diverse jerks. Have actual democracy.



HOUSE KURITA
Draconis Combine. Honourable jerks. But they make for great PPCs.



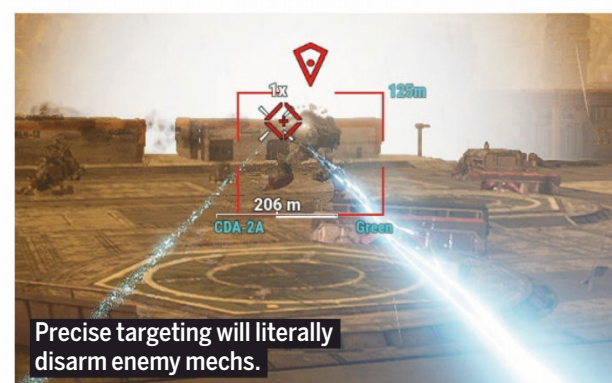
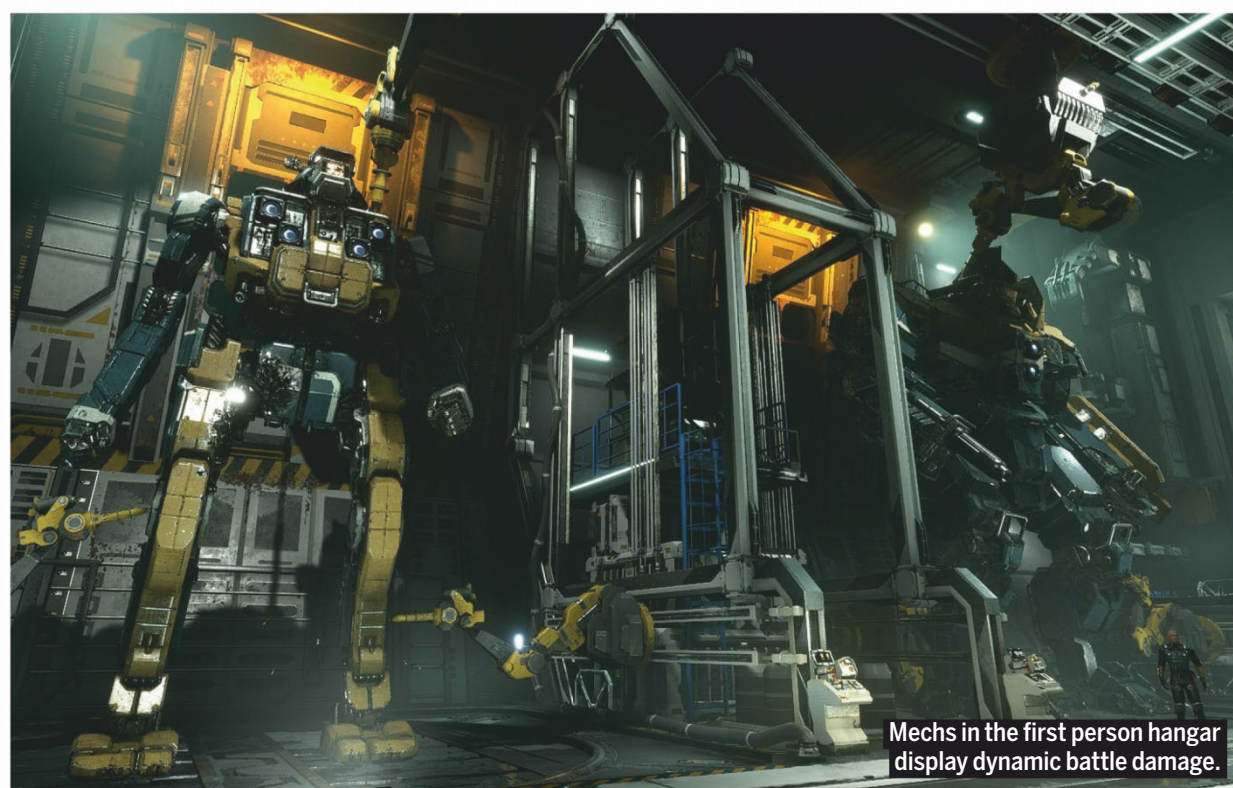
HOUSE STEINER
Lyrans. Commonwealth. Stuck-up rich jerks. Love Assault mechs.

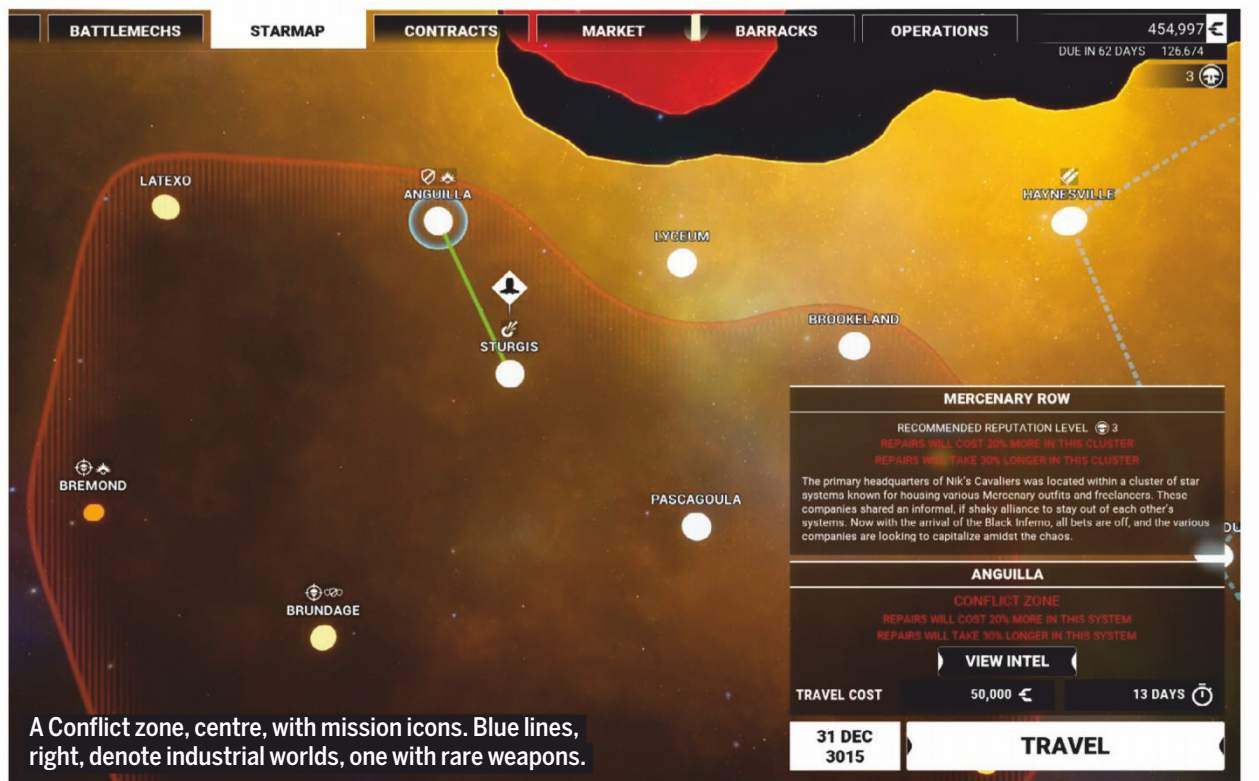
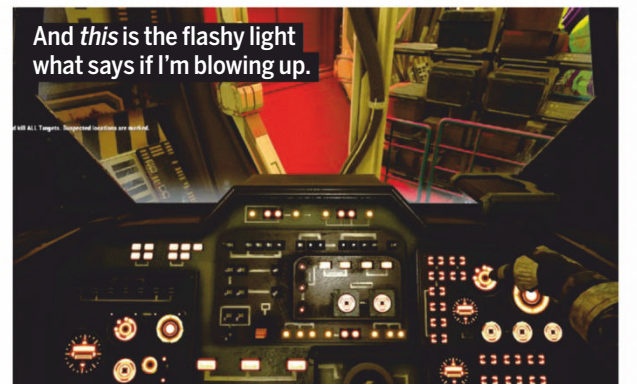


HOUSE LIAO
Capellan Confederation. Authoritarian jerks. Tough and rugged.



HOUSE DAVION
The Federated Suns. Elitist jerks. Flexible combined medium/heavy mech lances.





» only long-range weapons and continue circle-strafting an opponent inside their minimum range. Enemies can and will get stuck on terrain features, requiring you to pick through a whole city for one last, tiny tank before a mission can progress.

Raids quickly became my favourite missions. They're lightning-fast battles that require you to destroy a handful of specific targets scattered across a map. Things like radar stations or warehouses, usually. The catch is that you're only there to destroy those, then get out, and you're there to do it against silly numbers of defenders. Standing for a straight-up fight is likely to get you blown up, so I took delight in crafting speciality formations of fast, tough mechs geared to weave through cover and smash objectives before disappearing to other parts of the map. The strategy worked especially well in night fights and during weather events, when banks of swirling dust could shield my movements, or enemies' long-range shots were hampered by night vision mode. Customising mechs is superbly fun, and a variety of weird techs and mech variants show up, with more being added as the in-universe timeline advances. Hunting down rare mech or weapon icons on the campaign map is more fun than pursuing the main storyline.

The end of a mission is significantly less climactic. You don't desperately return to your drop ship under the fire of its guns and up the ramp into the bay, you just fade to black at the exfiltration point. Actually, drop ships don't shoot at all, aside from once during a cinematic in the tutorial. That's a weird thing to miss since *MechWarrior 4* so prominently and memorably featured the weapons on landed drop ships and Piranha's own *MechWarrior Online* had them as well. There's also just the one kind of drop ship – the Leopard – and the iconic spherical variant don't make an appearance.

NO PUNCHING

The drop ships aren't the only bit of missing *BattleTech* lore that would make *Mechwarrior 5* feel more complete. Infantry and aerospace fighter attacks are also absent – infantry conspicuously so since foot soldiers

GUN SHOW Key to your mech strategies is balancing your weapon types



AUTOCANNONS

ACs deal more damage for the heat they generate. Watch out for the range though..



MACHINE GUNS

Light up unarmoured targets real good. Otherwise, just don't bother.



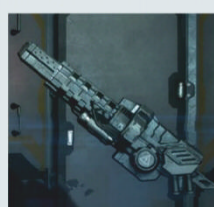
GAUSS RIFLES

Pinpoint accurate, high range, high damage and low heat. The mech sniper's dream.



FLAMERS

Short range, but they damage and raise your enemy's heat – slowing their fire rate.



LASERS

Lasers do great damage for their weight, but they do generate a lot of heat, unfortunately.



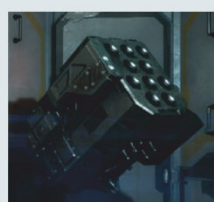
PPCs

The Particle Projector Cannon fires a long range, high damage and a near-instant shot.



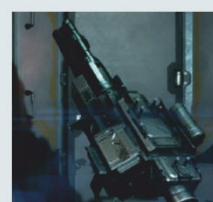
SRMs

Short Range Missiles deal a lot of damage, but are unguided and inaccurate.



LRMs

Long Range Missiles can lock on and fire at very distant targets. Scouts help greatly.



RARE VARIANTS

There are many benefits to using these such as increased range.

I took delight in crafting speciality formations of fast mechs

featured in a *MW5* trailer. With it featuring so gloriously, so prominently, in the recent *BattleTech* tactics game, melee combat is sorely missing from *MechWarrior 5* too. Mechs going full tilt collide with a crash of screeching metal and... awkwardly grind against each other. You start with a Centurion, a mech

with a prominent claw-and-shield arm for grabbing and slashing – but that arm just hangs limply. It's a notable absence when every FPS for 15 years has included a token melee attack.

Of course, none of those relatively small problems are so bad that they ruined *MechWarrior 5* as a mech combat simulator. What could have is the writing. I cannot remember the last time I

encountered a professional game with worse writing, dialogue, and narrative design than *MechWarrior 5: Mercenaries*. The characters are shallow and forgettable caricatures and the plot a paint-by-numbers revenge story. The few talented voice actors struggle with the barren dialogue they're given. The stories of prior *MechWarrior* games may have been FMV ham festivals, but at least they had some heart, and *BattleTech's* long history is rife with tales of star-crossed lovers and honourable space knights. You can't watch the *MechWarrior 2* betrayal cinematic, or the *MechWarrior 4* intro, and not laugh. *MechWarrior 5* made me feel absolutely nothing.

This is honestly kind of amazing, as the missions have you commit casual war crimes quite often. Sure, the civilian colony administrator is begging you to stop because there are women and children in the buildings you're levelling, but at the end of the mission your coworkers just say something like, "Haha wow that was a rough one we just did with the fusion flamethrowers on those schools and farms, let us collect our pay and never speak of this again".

None of that is to even mention the bits of narrative that are entirely nonsensical. A mission chain will first task you with covering a VIP's escape from one location, and then ask you to fight a desperate rearguard as the VIP's ship is fuelled to depart... except that supposedly immediate follow up will be on a planet a month of travel away. This sort of mismatch between description and events is the rule, not the exception. Perhaps most glaringly, the item and mission descriptions are riddled with errors and grammatical mistakes.

But *MechWarrior 5* is a game that will get a pass on its narrative woes because the narrative is so thin the gameplay completely trumps it. *MW5* is unmistakably a game about being a sandbox mech jockey and the stories are just a low-quality veneer over some superb robot combat. If you're here for a mech smashing simulator, this is the best new mech smashing simulator around. Here's hoping for more from a *MechWarrior 6*. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Mechwarrior 5: Mercenaries is here to serve as a showcase of nostalgic and joyful mech combat.

80

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

LIFE IS STRANGE 2 was always far too focused on the finish line. *By Alistair Jones*

During the third episode of *Life is Strange 2*, main character Sean Diaz is presented with a choice that could help bring his ordeal to an early end, but would put his little brother Daniel in danger. Being the responsible father figure that I clearly am, I decline the opportunity. But then later on in the episode, I'm asked to make that same choice again. And again. In the end, the decision is made for me, and everything falls to pieces.

Life is Strange 2 begins in suburban Seattle, where a fatal misunderstanding forces Sean and Daniel to flee their home. In his panic, Sean takes his brother on the run, aiming for his father's family home in Puerto Lobos, Mexico, and the pair take the first steps on their year-long journey to the border. His decision provides an impressive backdrop to their adventure – chilling Oregon winters, towering Californian forests and sweltering Arizona deserts offer an ambitious alternative to the series' small-town narratives – but also forces *Life is Strange 2* to immediately undermine its road-tripping raison d'être.

Rather than directly portray a 1,500 mile journey, developer Dontnod sticks to its series' classic tropes. Exploration, dialogue, and character development are its strengths, but those are difficult to achieve within the confines of a Greyhound bus. Instead, the story moves from vignette to vignette, with each chapter set months after the one before, in a place where Sean and Daniel can stay in relative safety for a few days or weeks.

Here lies the game's most existential dilemma. These havens provide a place to live – at least temporarily – almost entirely off-grid, a rare opportunity to lay low and take stock. In one episode, whole chunks of dialogue are given over to the idea of holding out for next month's paycheck, while another places the brothers firmly within the nuclear family they both so clearly crave. Those themes, of financial security

and familial responsibility, are woven throughout the game, but their importance pales in comparison to Dontnod's desire for a classic roadtrip, and so Sean and Daniel are moved on, irrespective of the decisions made within the episode.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that *Life is Strange 2*'s most powerful tool is not directly in your hands. While players control Sean, it's Daniel who boasts

supernatural abilities. Sean quickly adopts the role of mentor, but his younger brother is a precocious child, and while he might start by using his powers for something innocuous as

Dontnod has something to say about American race relations

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A cross-country road-trip driven by player choice (apparently)

EXPECT TO PAY
£32

DEVELOPER
Dontnod Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-5820K,
8GB RAM,
GeForce GTX 950

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
bit.ly/34TEa7E

cheating at dice, it's not long before he begins to understand the extent of his abilities. Eventually, the player isn't just battling with the game's desire to get you to Mexico no matter the narrative implications, but against a game mechanic that happens to have developed a personality.

UNTIL NEXT TIME

The first episode of *Life is Strange 2* released in September 2018, meaning the journey from debut to finale took more than 14 months. Nearly four months passed between episodes one and two alone, and while the release cadence sped up as the series reached its finale, the damage had already been done. The time between episodes may have been an attempt to mirror the length of Sean and Daniel's journey, but to do so at the expense of narrative pacing and character development feels misjudged. So much of the brothers' story happens off-screen that it makes it difficult to stay engaged between chapters.

There are some excellent moments dotted throughout the game, and it's clear that Dontnod has something to say about American race relations. Often, it leans too heavily on patriotic stereotypes to do so, but the final episode in particular focuses carefully on the concept of Sean's reverse American Dream. Overall though, *Life is Strange 2* is more interested in that dream than in its own central themes – those of brotherhood, family, and the passing down of knowledge to the next generations. Its desire to stick to the series' tropes means you're forced into setpiece after setpiece on your inevitable road to Mexico, without any desire to cater to the player who just wants to be a good big brother. ■

KEROUAC, EAT YOUR HEART OUT

Life is Strange 2's journey across America



PC GAMER VERDICT

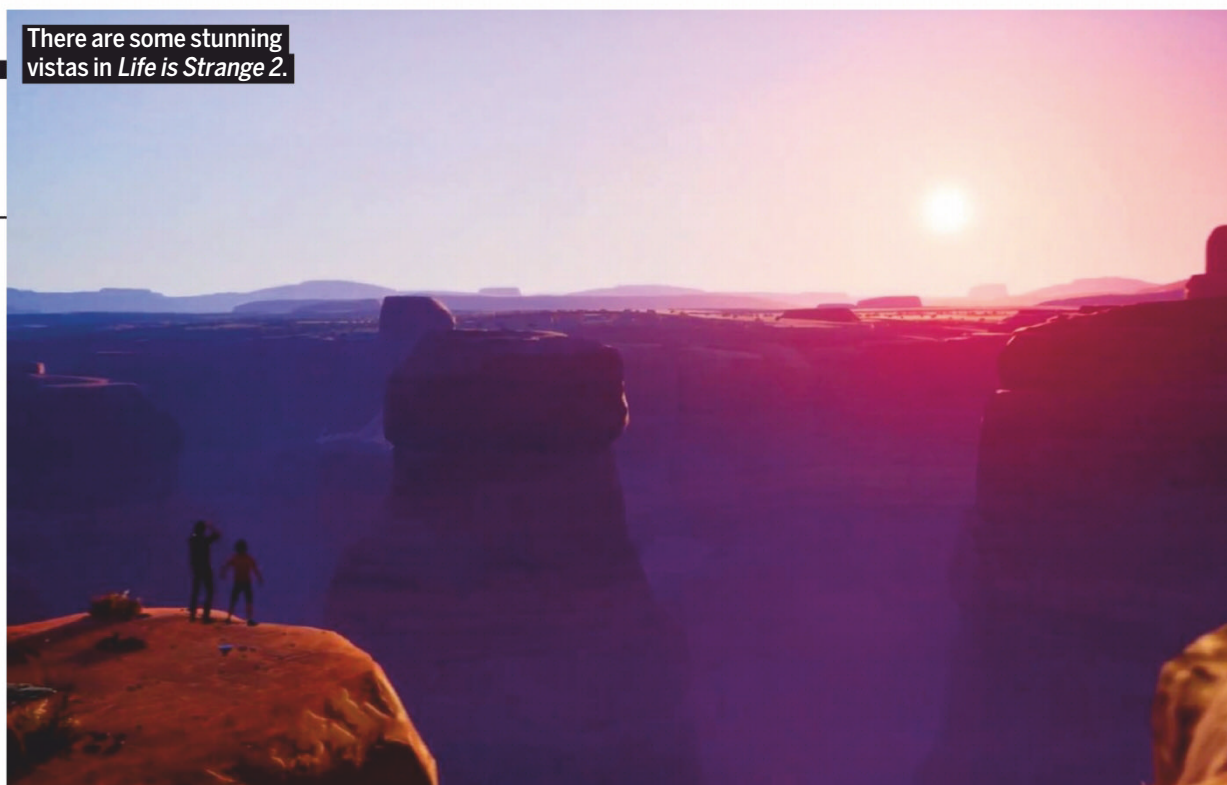
Life is Strange 2 promises a classic American roadtrip, but it fails to put you in the driving seat.

68

Pep talks about!



There are some stunning vistas in *Life is Strange 2*.



Daniel gets to grips with his telekinetic powers.



There's always one twat with an acoustic guitar at these things.



WAR NEVER CHANGES

DARKSIDERS GENESIS proves the series still has that invisible touch. *By Luke Kemp*

There's good reason to welcome the return of the horsemen of the apocalypse, and not only because of what's on your social media feed. In the world of videogames they star in a great series that didn't deserve to pass like wind with the somewhat lame third entry. And lo, *Airship Syndicate* did rise from the ashes of Vigil Games – who did once develop entries first and second – and thus it spake unto the industry, “Let's do this”.

Darksiders has always bounced gleefully from one influence to the next. The first game borrowed heavily from Nintendo's *Zelda* series, while the second – which starred a hilariously ripped version of Death – clearly took its wallrunning cue from the *Prince of Persia* reboot. Then, the Gunfire Games-developed *Darksiders III* decided to join the wearisomely long line of titles trying to copy *Dark Souls*. Given the history of the series, the move to an entirely different genre isn't really as jarring as it might be.

Darksiders Genesis is an action-RPG, with all the waves of enemies and grabbing of loot that you might expect. I'm slightly surprised, therefore, to find that it still immediately and consistently feels like *Darksiders*. It's a prequel to the first game, which follows War and, for the first time, Strife. Notorious rascal Lucifer is up to something, and The Council has taken time out from

changing the bin collection days without telling anybody to instruct these two lovable harbingers of doom to find out what it is.

The developers have an obvious, genuine fondness for the series. Not only do we see returning characters such as Samael and Vulgrim (I never would've forgiven the absence of my favourite demonic shopkeeper), weapons and abilities from the core games have been carefully

integrated. For example, War still has his boomerang-like Vorpall Blade, both horsemen can grab objects from afar with a sort of ghostly Inspector Gadget arm, and Strife soon unlocks the Void Bomb for some portal creation shenanigans. Fellow *Darksiders* fans, we are home!

A WAR WELCOME

I instantly gravitate towards Strife simply because this is the first game he's appeared in, but I soon find that he matches my play style well enough

Strife soon unlocks the Void Bomb for some portal creation

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The end of the world as we know it, in action-RPG form

EXPECT TO PAY
£27

DEVELOPER
Airship Syndicate

PUBLISHER
THQ Nordic

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
2 player co-op (online or splitscreen)

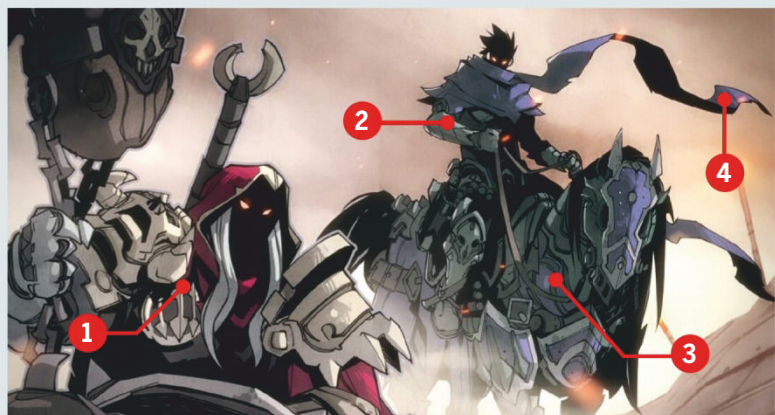
LINK
darksiders.com

for me to stick almost exclusively with him. Although he's a decent melee fighter, Strife dual wields guns and is designed for fighting at a distance where he can. His standard infinite bullets do the job just fine, but there are different types of ammo to be found, most of which you have to search for. The more powerful shot types tend to draw from a finite ammo supply however, so you can't carve your way through with, say, a laser beam for long.

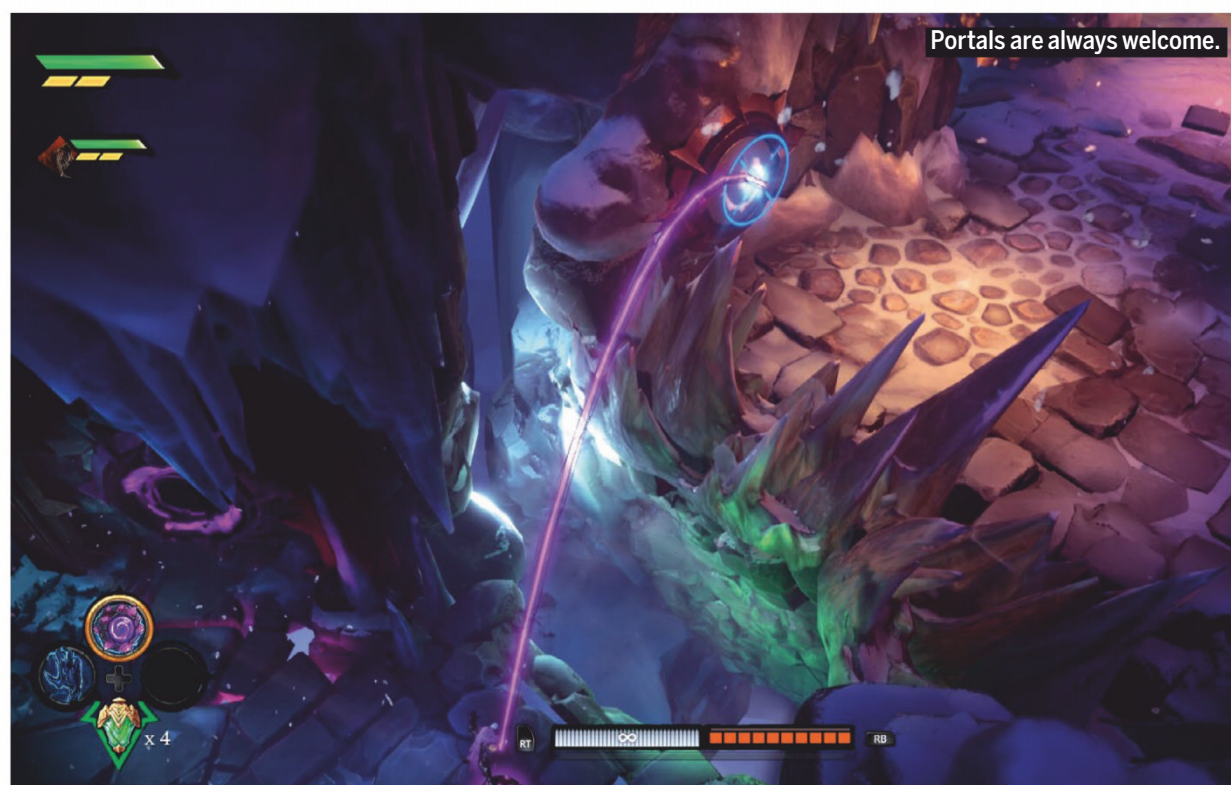
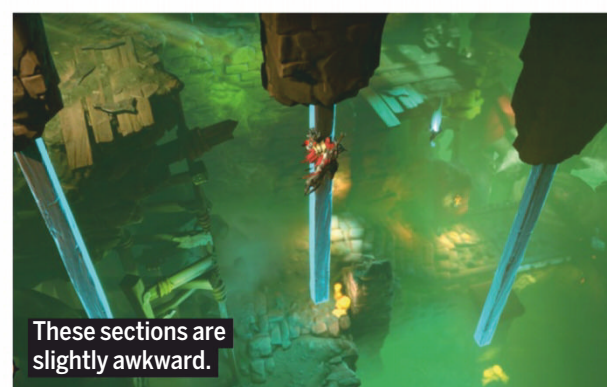
War plays completely differently. He's almost powerless at a distance, so it's all about hitting enemies with a comically large sword with him. You can simply button bash if you're playing on Casual difficulty, but anything above that requires you to explore the nuances of combat. Although he's not my preferred character, I still really enjoy his playstyle. A large part of this comes down to the simple fact that he can block and parry. That may not sound particularly interesting, but let me tell you going toe-to-toe with a 100 foot tall fire demon and killing it without losing so much as a sliver of health is always a nice little ego boost. There are abilities and combos to unlock and power up, too. The experience changes to a pleasing degree depending on who you play as.

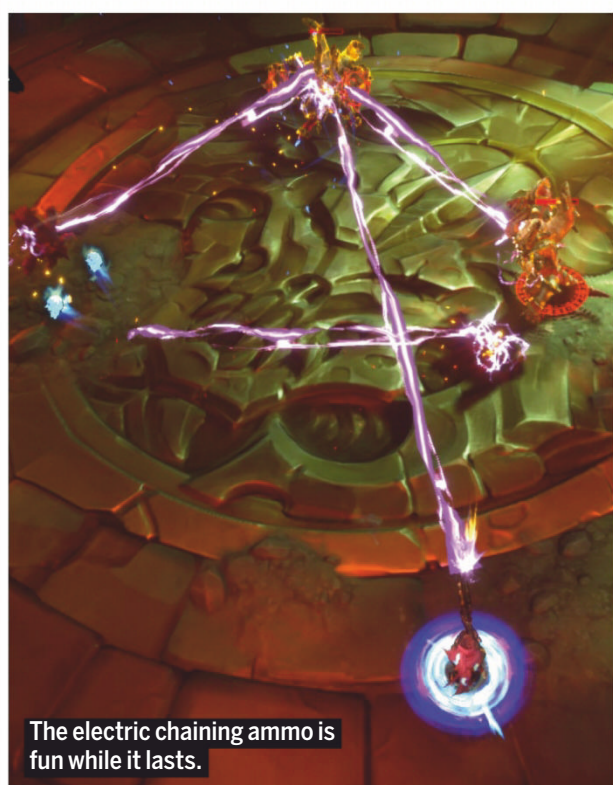
The characters differ not only in play style, but also in personality, and this is one of the areas where I find myself slightly disappointed. The *Darksiders* story has always been silly, but (in the first two games, at least) a kind of perfect silly, a self-important nonsense that took itself just seriously enough to be enjoyable without straying into the tiresome. Things have catapulted in totally the other direction here. It's too self-aware, too ready to make a joke at its own expense. It's not self-parody, but rather a swapping of biblical fantasy for explicit comedy. Strife talks like a wise-cracking rogue cop who doesn't play by the book, with War is his hulking, straight-man foil. Basically, the gunslinger is a cross >>

WAR AND STRIFE Duo know what I mean?



1. War. Loves fighting and red hoodies.
2. Strife. Loves pistols and telling bad jokes.
3. Horse armour. No DLC required.
4. Even the Horsemen love scarves.





» between Axel Foley and Peter Quill, while War has been turned into a cross between Drax and your dad. Worst of all, I counted just one gag in the whole script that made me laugh.

TROUBLE AND STRIFE

Still, the talking head story sequences can be skipped if you wish, and gameplay is thankfully miles ahead of the writing. There are 16 chapters in all, and each one (excluding the five which are major boss fights) is a superbly designed open map. You're prevented from riding your ghostly horse across a frustratingly large percentage of the landscape, but combat is more fun on foot anyway. Yes, there are swarms of demonic baddies to kill punctuated by the occasional bit of light puzzling, but that's only half the story.

There are many nooks and, indeed, crannies that can be missed on your way to the end of the level. Some of these will be impossible to access first time round. You might not have the ability needed to, say, smash through an obstacle or activate what is in effect an apocalyptic trampoline. Then there are Trickster doors. These are usually hidden and require special collectible keys to unlock (often, more than one at a time). These might lead to a small room with goodies and a handful of enemies, or a larger area similarly laden with treasure. It's well worth seeking these and other hidden areas out. I was rewarded for completing a slightly annoying optional puzzle, with an ammo type that makes enemies bleed health orbs, something that came in handy for the final boss.

It's important to Hoover up everything that bursts from chests, broken boxes, and fallen enemies – souls (the game's currency), ammo, health, Wrath orbs to power limited-use abilities – but nothing is ultimately more important than creature orbs. There's no traditional character levelling. Instead, each enemy in the game is represented by an orb that you can equip in a skill tree, which increases your characters' power ratings as well as bestowing individual buffs. These orbs are dropped randomly (with the exception of bosses), and it's not quite as simple as grabbing one and equipping it in the menu.

Each orb has multiple power levels. Equipping one automatically activates level one, but you'll have to collect many of the same type –

DARK SLIDERS *The ups and downs of the series so far*



usually dozens – to fully power it up. There are further complications too, such as matching bonuses within the tree and some nodes limiting the potential of an orb. So if you want to, say, maximise your attack power, you'll need to have the right orbs in the right slots, and keep revisiting levels heavily populated with the enemies you're after.

THUMP & GRIND

This might sound complicated and grind-heavy. Therein lies the genius of *Darksiders Genesis*

– it's not complicated and it's only grind-heavy if you want it to be. Clearly aware that the game might attract series fans who wouldn't usually consider playing an isometric action-RPG, the developers have made provisions for those who want to play through the game start to finish without looking back. Casual difficulty is forgiving enough that you need only give the orb tree the briefest of considerations. I played through on Normal, and managed to finish with very little grinding thanks to the orb tree and some mildly tactical play. In fact, I ignored recommended power levels for chapters, and probably could have finished with no grinding at all. Hard mode requires you to be a bit

more careful – but, for those who live for the grind, it's after you see the credits roll

that the true game begins.

Vanquish the big bad at the end of the story (who, incidentally,

represents an enormous difficulty spike) and Apocalyptic difficulty is unlocked. This setting is not messing around and will see you dead within minutes if you're careless or poorly prepared. With all chapters now at your disposal, it's time to construct the very best orb tree you can, and

comb back through each level again and again. Find every path and collectible, max out that orb tree, purchase all those upgrades, take a deep breath and do it all over again on Apocalyptic.

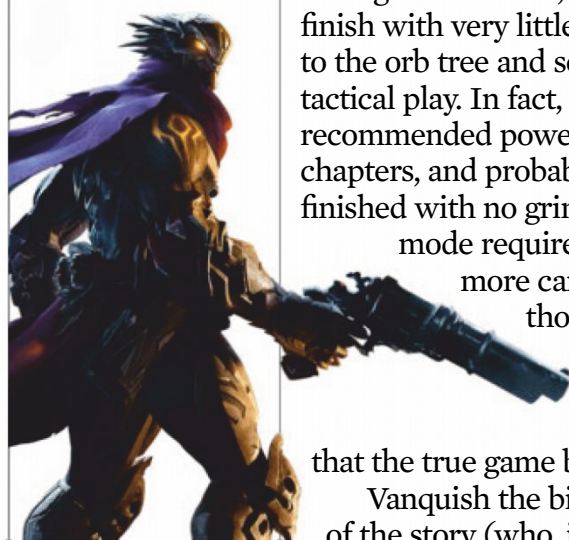
Plus, partway through your adventure you unlock the Arena. This is a series of survival challenges, each consisting of ten waves of enemies, with an endless mode to be unlocked once you've mastered all the others. This feeds from and into the core loop in an interesting way. It's great for grinding, as it's a simple and relatively quick way to harvest creature orbs and souls. Challenges increase in difficulty as you make your way through the list, requiring you to power up more in order to have a decent chance of success.

There are plenty of reasons to keep coming back, then, to the simple but satisfying combat. It won't be long before the levels have given up all their secrets, but what remains is a solid apocalyptic action-RPG. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A great one-shot adventure or an enjoyable grindfest, depending on which you're after.

81



HALO AGAIN

Mouse aim makes **HALO: REACH**'s multiplayer and strong campaign better than ever. *By Wes Fenlon*

I literally cackled the first time I fired a sniper rifle. Two shots, two kills, heavy calibre rounds crossing the map and cracking skulls as casually as you'd order off a drink menu. In the thousands of hours of *Halo* I played on console, I was never a good sniper. Headshots with a controller were a minor miracle. With a mouse, I point at the thing I want to die, and it obliges. Playing *Reach* on PC is like bringing death lasers to a fight built for blunderbusses.

Is this what the weapons and maps and abilities were designed around? Hell no. Is it balanced? Absolutely not. But now I never want to play *Halo* any other way.

Halo: Reach was made for the Xbox 360 in 2010, and nine years later it's the first part of *The Master Chief Collection*, an anthology spanning the *Halo* series, to arrive on PC. Playing it again for the first time in many years, I think it's still a shooter worth experiencing in 2019.

The campaign is full of big, open-ended combat encounters with a freedom still rare in shooters. Sometimes I'll go out of my way to kick a puny Grunt out of his Ghost, a one person anti-grav vehicle with a nasty pair of laser cannons, just so I can use it to run over his friends. Other times I'll hang back and use a rifle to pick off Jackals by shooting them in the hand and then in the head, the most satisfying two-shot kill in videogames. The real threats

are the Elites and the Brutes, whose AI can occasionally still be intimidating today.

In most shooters it's fun to switch weapons to decide what kind of carnage you want to dish out in the moment, or what works best against a particular enemy. That's true in *Halo*, too – but because you can only carry two weapons at a time, and you don't have a permanent arsenal the way you do in a game

like *Doom*, every mission is a series of on-the-fly adaptations. I'm constantly analysing the most efficient or creative ways to work with what's around me. The freedom of every encounter is key to why *Halo*'s enemies are still fun to shoot, even though they haven't changed much over almost 20 years.

NO BAD MISSIONS

The best *Halo* missions weave together open areas and vehicle segments with close quarters battles,

The campaign is full of big, open-ended combat encounters

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A first person shooter about the end of the world

EXPECT TO PAY

£7

DEVELOPER

Bungie, 343 Industries

PUBLISHER

Xbox Games Studios

REVIEWED ON

GTX 980, i7-6700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

16-player competitive, up to 4-player co-op in campaign and Firefight

LINK

halowaypoint.com

alternating between setpieces and smaller moments. In most *Halo* games, there are one or two missions that string together all of these pieces and really stand out. But in *Reach*, that's most of the campaign, and there isn't one bad mission. There's no fat on this game.

The story, about a unit of Spartan soldiers fighting to save a doomed planet, tries really hard for poignant moments, with a sad piano score for every tragedy. But we don't get to spend enough time with the squad to really feel the gut punch. Still, it's hard to make a hopeless war fun, and *Reach* leaves a heavier emotional imprint than most shooters.

After finishing the campaign, I'm already eager to jump back into my favourite levels with four-player co-op, and so my experience playing online, both in co-op and competitive multiplayer, has been lag-free, thanks to dedicated servers.

Ultimately the issues with *Halo: Reach* wash away when I start aiming with a mouse. This does introduce some new problems. Accurate long-range weapons like the DMR dominate maps. Most of the guns become irrelevant. And *Reach* already had baggage. *Halo* has the DNA of an arena shooter, where everyone is on equal footing and controlling the map is key to victory. *Reach* added 'armour abilities' like sprint and a decoy, which distract from the shooting.

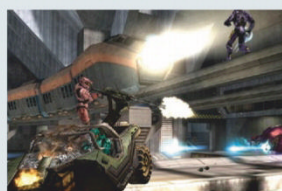
But playing multiplayer now, I'm finding armour abilities and loadouts don't bother me nearly as much as they once did, because the basic gunplay is so satisfying with a mouse. It's exciting to come back to *Reach* after nearly a decade and find its multiplayer more fun than ever, in a port that bodes well for the rest of the series living on forever on PC. ■

PEAK CHIEF *Don't miss these high points of the Halo series*



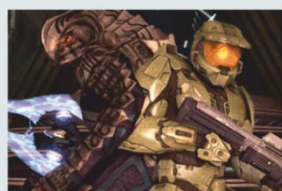
HALO: CE: CTF ON BLOOD GULCH

The quintessential classic multiplayer experience, pistol sniping over hilltops and maddening instant touch return on the flag.



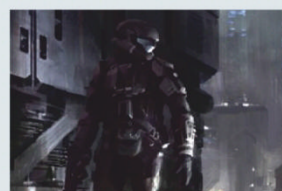
HALO 2: ASSAULT ON TERMINAL, CONTAINMENT

Two sprawling, fantastic maps for objective modes that were never remade in later *Halos*.



HALO 3: MISSION 7, THE COVENANT

Halo campaign design at its very best, with thrilling vehicle segments, big freeform battles, and an emotional finish.



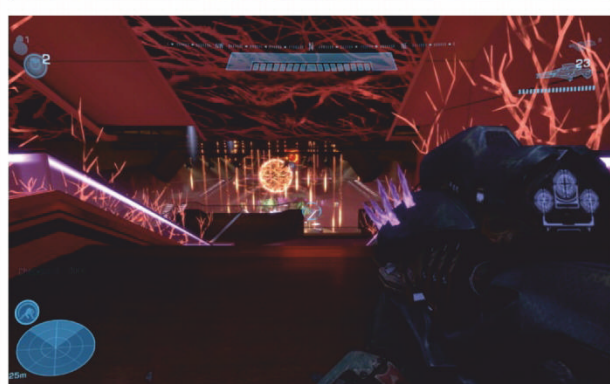
HALO ODST: MOMBOSA STREETS

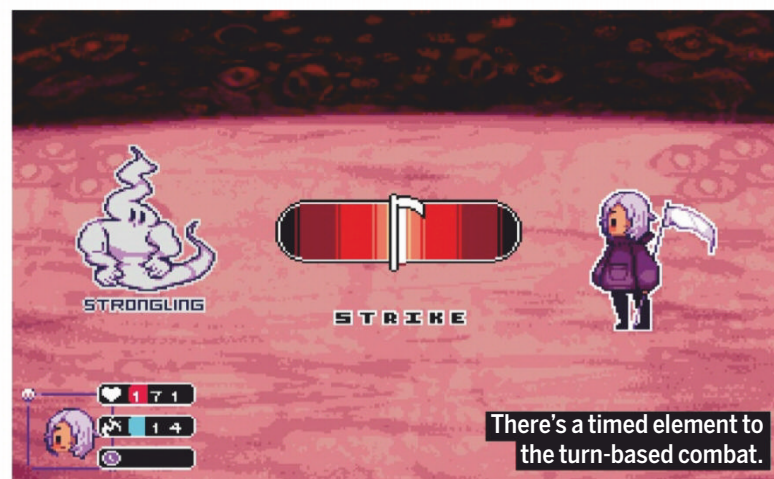
The moody free roaming hub that ties together *ODST*'s missions is like nothing else in *Halo*.

PC GAMER VERDICT

The PC port minimizes *Reach*'s flaws and highlights its strengths, from the campaign to the joy of a clean headshot.

76





REAPER CHEAP

It's not so grim being a reaper in the sweet **GRIMM'S HOLLOW**

Finally, an *Undertale*-style RPG where you can really make the most of the combat system – without feeling awful about every enemy you kill. *Grimm's Hollow* begins with a girl named Lavender waking up in the afterlife. Hey, so it turns out there's a purgatory, and it's full of violent ghosts, but also reapers to dispatch them to the Great Beyond. Upon death, Lavender is designated as a reaper, while her similarly deceased little brother becomes a ghost.

I mentioned *Undertale*, and that's because *Grimm* lives in its enormous shadow, with its spooky, kooky underworld, its cute and funny cast of characters, and the surprising emotion it can evoke through its earnest dialogue. It isn't mawkish or overly sentimental; in fact, it undercuts its melancholy at almost every opportunity, with a stupid joke. Naturally, that only endeared me more to the memorable characters. There's Grimm, the master reaper who enjoys a nice cup of tea, and Baker, who forgoes slaying for baking bread. Over the course of a couple of hours you'll get to know these characters intimately, adding weight to the dramatic events of each ending.

To get there, you'll need to master the game's combat system, which is feature-rich, if a little awkward in

implementation. Borrowing the best bits from classic JRPGs, there's a *Final Fantasy*-style ATB system (turn-based meets real-time combat), partnered with the quick-time flourishes from the forgotten *Shadow Hearts*. After every melee attack, you'll be asked to hit the down key on a *Golf*-style swing-o-meter. Do it right, and you'll inflict more damage. But hit too early, or wait too long, and your attack will whiff. Also, you'll

be asked for a timed response when defending special enemy attacks. It's a neat system, most of the time.

When it feels fair, these QTEs succeed in keeping you engaged during battles – I've played so many JRPGs where I just hit confirm over and over during regular combat. But they conflict awkwardly with the menu system. You can be asked to hit

The game's combat system is feature-rich, if a little awkward

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A turn-based RPG where you play as a grim reaper

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Mahum Najam

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz,
6GB RAM, GeForce GT 610

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/GrimmHollow

down even when you're in the middle of the command menu. A menu you navigate entirely by using the up and down keys.

UP, UP, DOWN, DOWN

A bigger problem is the uneven difficulty level. Battles are brutal – but what the game doesn't tell you is that you can purchase stat upgrades that trivialise it, almost right away. Later encounters do redress the balance, but it feels like a big, ambitious combat system has been jammed, slightly inelegantly, into a two-hour game.

However, I think some iffy balancing is a fair trade off for a relatively complex battle system that held my attention to the close of the game. The Hollow's three dungeons are pretty enjoyable to explore, as you hunt secret doors and fight ghosts to an absolute banger of a battle theme. It's an epic RPG in miniature, and the compression isn't perfect. But few games have such enormous heart. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A full-fledged RPG shrunk to one you'll finish in a couple of hours. A bit unbalanced, but you'll forgive it its flaws.

80

RESISTANCE IS FUN

Rage against machines in **THE LAST RESISTANCE**

Wilderness and robots make for an evocative combination, one that works particularly well in the compact playing field of *The Last Resistance*: a game of hiding from deadly robots, and then taking them down. Playing out like a very, very small-scale *Far Cry*, you're dropped into a refreshingly Nordic open space that offers maybe ten minutes of exploration as you increase your arsenal enough to eliminate a robot threat. There's a handsome bleakness to the environment that makes it more attractive than many apocalypses, its muted hues contrasting nicely with the stark black and glowing red of the scattered enemies.

Speaking of which, it's your job to eliminate them. You start the game with no weapons, but pretty soon you'll find an axe and then a shotgun,

tools that make the smaller enemies at least rather trivial to deal with.

The AI of those little spider bots is decidedly simplistic: they won't stop chasing you, ever, until you're dead. Or, more likely, until they're dead, as they're far slower and weaker than you are. The massive, War of the Worlds-style tripod enemies pose a deadlier threat, and remain an ominous presence even as you increase in killing power. The game comes alive when you're sprinting between their search lights, to the next shack and its resources.

The Last Resistance, however, is a small game. Not just in terms of map size, but in its progression: you acquire the axe, and then the shotgun in a linear order.

While you likely won't replay it, there's something to be said for a game where you can destroy a robot army during your coffee break. ■

65



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Spoland

LINK
spoland.itch.io

READY PLAYER ONE

From robots to no bots with **NO PLAYERS ONLINE**

There's something eerie about a public space that is devoid of people, a fact that first-person horror *No Players Online* utilises to its advantage. It's set in an online FPS, but one where you're the only player. Meaning it's just you and your gun, running around an empty map.

Naturally it's not quite that simple and the game eventually throws surprises at you, like... well, they wouldn't be very surprising if I gave them all away. But the game's few set-pieces are effective, well-paced, expertly introduced and more original than the prankish jump scares found in many horror games.

Without revealing too much, the abandoned server you're playing on isn't quite as empty as the game initially suggests. A presence that makes itself known as you play a (seemingly futile) game of Capture

the Flag. It's this steadily growing anticipation that makes *No Players Online* so wonderfully tense to play – you just know something will happen as you run from capture point to capture point. But what will that be, exactly?

As *NPO* comes to a close, and its cards are laid out on the table, it becomes clear that it owes something to the technological horror of the Ring series, only with a haunted game rather than a spooky videotape. If the final revelation is a bit preposterous, then it's hard to fault the general theme of the game: what are old servers but essentially graveyards haunted by the people that have abandoned them?

Though *NPO* doesn't fully explore its promising premise, it does raise questions as it puts one tentative foot into thrilling, and under-explored horror territory. ■

78



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
papercookies

LINK
papercookies.itch.io

Maybe Shawn Ashmore's face will save Xbox One! Maybe not.



BROKEN DREAMS

Time hasn't been kind to **QUANTUM BREAK**

I was braced to spend 500 words gently ribbing *Quantum Break*. It feels like low-hanging temporal fruit, thanks to the time-bending combat and smattering of semi-famous faces. Crowbarring in a whole TV show just feels desperate, like giving away a chicken baguette as a magazine cover mount. But even though you can feel the weight of Microsoft's crushing expectations when you play, there's still something engaging about this confidently-told confection.

The hucksterism of adding a TV show is clearer with the benefit of hindsight. I'm quite happy to play a game about cabbagey everyman with magical powers; but I'm too time-poor to consider watching a show about the same thing. It's a cool, ambitious idea that's lavishly executed. But the player's impact on the outcome of the show is questionable and each episode can feel like a narrative speedbump when all you want to do it get back in and blam people. This is a Remedy game, after all.

Thankfully, the in-game performances more than make up for my indifference to the show. Shawn Ashmore's Jack Joyce is essentially a handsome walnut that's been rolled through Gap. His performance is honest enough to legitimise expositional in-head VO and a plot

that's quite obviously bobbins. And Aidan Gillen is at his punchable best as Paul Serene, a villain whose name, choice of actor and chinos belie how complicated he actually is. But, again, *Quantum Break* tries too hard to

show you how seriously it takes its craft. The facial animation is incredible, but it's presented at the cost of immersion.

The story is good enough that the desperate presentation doesn't detract from it,

but it's compounded by some narrative dissonance. Joyce's justification for gunning down private military forces like a veteran Navy SEAL is that he's 'used a gun before', which is like me baking a Gateau St Honoré because 'I've used a spoon before'. But *Quantum Break* does jolt to life when the shooting starts. The lack of a rigid cover

Aidan Gillen is at his punchable best as Paul Serene

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
HBO Presents:
Bernard's Watch

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Remedy Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Microsoft Studios

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
[remedygames.com/
games/quantumbreak](http://remedygames.com/games/quantumbreak)

mechanic forces you to stay mobile and chain your powers, which is exhilarating. One moment you're reflecting bullets with a temporal shield, the next you're blinking behind enemies to outflank them in slow motion. It looks and feels cool, even if it's not especially varied or imaginative. I also love that it's enough just to add 'time' before each of Jack's powers. If I was Jack Joyce I'd be time-writing right now. I hope you're enjoying time-reading.

JUMP ASHMORE, JUMP

One thing that's wholly unloveable, however, is the platforming sections – they're unspeakably ponderous. This is a shame, because the environments in *Quantum Break* are detailed enough to deserve further exploration. You can uncover hidden 'content' in each level, but it's not enough of a distraction from the shooting and graceless platforming. It leaves the impression of a good game that lacks something essential. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Shiny presentation can't disguise a perfunctory Remedy shooter with some Hollywood trimmings.

68

FORGET ME NOT

Pressen the issue in **REMEMBER ME**

I picked *Remember Me* for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it loosely fits with the theme of 'time', which seems appropriate as we urge our collective self towards the end of the century. Secondly, I thought it'd be terrible. But, annoyingly, I quite like it.

Everything is absurdly striking. Neo-Paris is gorgeous: a cascading mix of old and new. I like the integration of tooltip descriptions as adverts and shopfronts, even if I do spend some time mistakenly trying to interact with them. And the characters all look like they've spin-kicked their way off the catwalk: Nilin's wanted poster could be an advert for hyaluronic acid and even the mutants resemble those angular models you see at some of those haute couture fashion shows.

Everything apart from the design in *Remember Me*, however, is rather

ordinary. There's a wanted amnesiac plot, mysterious hooded handler and sinister, sting-pulling corporation complete with its own paramilitary force for Nilin to pummel. There are some attempts here to find originality: you build your own combos using 'Pressens' – *Remember Me*'s version of punches and kicks, and a word I find annoying – but the flexibility is limited.

And then there's the Memory Remixes, which allow you to alter people's recollections – a cool idea that in practice feels like rewinding a three-hour VHS recording of your parents' wedding. But despite this, I'm into it. It's like a sexy clicker game where you clamber through a fabulous future city and uppercut goons on repeat. Nilin would fit well into a 7/10 *Smash* game alongside Monkey from *Enslaved* and Baldo-man from *Red Faction*. ■

66



Nice to see they still have Shoezone in Neo-Paris.



If Jean Paul Gaultier did prisoner restraint systems.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£23

DEVELOPER
DONTNOD Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Capcom

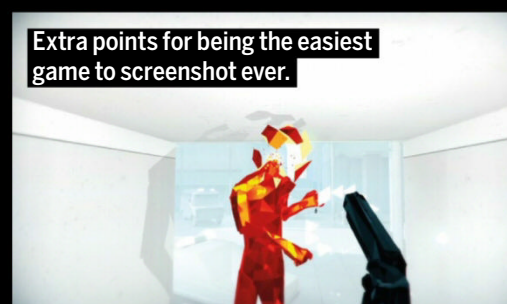


Someone steal this idea and make a Russian Doll game.

MINIT

The pitch for *Minit* is that your curious little duck-thing protagonist picks up a cursed sword that kills them every 60 seconds. The reality is that you'll die far more often than that – sometimes by accident, but more often because you press the insta-death button when you realise you'll never solve the next puzzle in time. This means the genuinely original idea ends up featuring more waterfowl slaughter than an especially brutal episode of *Springwatch*. It's stylish, smart, and satisfying, even when the ticking death clock become more of an inconvenience than a challenge. And there's a sense of relief when you get past a puzzle with seconds to spare. ■

72



Extra points for being the easiest game to screenshot ever.

SUPERHOT

Hollywood action sequences would have us believe it's possible to sidestep bullets, brain baddies with thrown projectiles, and sashay out of buildings while things explode behind us. And *Superhot* brings that delusion to life with swaggering panache, but also: it doesn't. Because if I've learnt anything playing *Superhot*, it's that action heroes don't dither. John Wick doesn't get decision fatigue when he's choosing which mafioso to punch. Jason Bourne never had to phone a friend when carrying out an assassination (good job, since they're probably all dead). But in spite of my wobbling lack of decisiveness, I still feel unreasonably cool playing *Superhot*. ■

82



A right royal gritty reboot.

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE WARRIOR WITHIN

You can't talk about time in games without talking about *Prince of Persia*. But instead of the charming 2003 reboot, let's take a look at the angsty sequel instead. *Warrior Within* still has the elegant combat and thoughtful puzzles, but it's even harder to take the prince seriously now than it was 15 years ago. The prevalence of nudey bits makes this feel like gaming's version of that scene in *Spider-Man 3* when Parker goes edgy. ■

60

THEROS

BEYOND DEATH

E S C A P E Y O U R F A T E



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AVAILABLE ON



16TH JANUARY

CONTENTS

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



PC CASES

Prevent your PC components spilling all over the carpet with a stylish case

*By Alice Newcome-Beill
and Terrence Mai*

There are many PC cases but they all serve to house all those components you picked out. If you appreciate looks as well as performance, picking out a new case can be very exciting. Think about

your components before buying; there's nothing more disappointing than spending a mint on a graphics card only to realise it won't fit into the case you've picked. Luckily there are cases for nearly any build, so you'll always have an excellent array of options.





Cosmos C700P

COOLER MASTER £300

The best full tower case right now

1 Much like the original Cooler Master Cosmos, the C700P is a hefty beast with a similarly large price tag. However, we'd argue that it's worth the expense.

A beautiful handlebar design, curved glass panel and sleek colour scheme are matched by features that'll support even the highest-end components (including E-ATX motherboards and oversized GPUs).

Cooler Master's latest manufacturing techniques are truly fancy, replacing the tubular rails of previous models with castings and putting a curve on the forward edge of its tempered

glass side panel. We also see white stripes down the sides of the top panel, the bottoms of the lower rails, and around the port section, all of which contain RGB lighting. A larger footprint means you won't be pushed for space either. What's more, the RGB is subtle enough not to distract.

This is a lot to spend on an enclosure. However, those who are willing to go all out on a build will get everything they need.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Integrated RGB lighting system
- ⊕ Adjustable motherboard layout
- ⊖ May require PSU extension cables
- ⊖ Lots of plastic

SPECS FORM FACTOR: FULL TOWER / MOTHERBOARDS: MINI-ITX, MICRO-ATX, ATX, E-ATX (UP TO 12" X 11")
/ DIMENSIONS: 639 X 306 X 651MM / WEIGHT: 22.2 KG / RADIATORS: UP TO 280MM

H710i

NZXT £180

The best mid-tower PC case

2 This latest iteration of NZXT's 'smart' case brings a couple of new features to help modernise your build. This ultra-clean and uncomplicated mid-tower emphasises convenience above all, with a front panel USB-C port and the ability to vertical-mount a GPU with a separate PCIe riser.

The H710i features integrated RGB lighting around the tempered glass side panel, controlled by the NZXT CAM software and a built-in LED lighting hub that allows for easy control of RGB lighting and fan speeds as well. To keep things cool, it features ventilation gutters

that run the perimeter of each side, aided by the four 120mm fans included in the box.

Cable routing is where the H710i really shines, thanks to a large aluminium slat that allows you to route your cables into channels on the back. This keeps everything clean and uncluttered, and built-in velcro straps hold it all down. It's an easy alternative to the rubber gasket solution found on other mid-towers.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Integrated addressable LED lighting
- ⊕ CAM powered "smart device"
- ⊕ Vertical GPU mount
- ⊖ Cramped HDD space

SPECS FORM FACTOR: MID TOWER / MOTHERBOARDS: MINI-ITX, MICRO-ATX, ATX, E-ATX (UP TO 10.7") / DIMENSIONS: 230 X 516 X 494MM / WEIGHT: 12.3 KG / DRIVE BAYS: 2.5": 7, 3.5": 4

GROUP TEST

3



H200i

NZXT £95

The best mini-ITX PC case

3 NZXT's H200i is essentially a miniature version of the H710i. It's all about packing a high-end system into a compact, minimalistic package.

Like its bigger brother, the case comes equipped with NZXT's smart hub and also includes two fans and one RGB LED strip. With plentiful support for liquid cooling and full-sized components, the H200i is the perfect compromise between smaller ITX builds and larger mid-sized towers.

The H200i ditches any USB 2.0 ports, leaving just a pair of USB 3.0 ports and the standard

front audio jacks. Readers hoping a USB-C port might replace the missing USB 2.0 ports will be sadly disappointed.

A removable 2.5-inch SSD mounting bracket sits on the exposed side of the power supply shroud. There's also a metal bar running from top to bottom for cable management, which can support a 160mm-tall tube reservoir if you're in to DIY liquid cooling.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Excellent cooling support
- ⊕ Pre-installed addressable RGB
- ⊕ Integrated CAM smart device
- ⊖ Airflow isn't too great

SPECS FORM FACTOR: MINI-ITX TOWER / MOTHERBOARDS: MINI-ITX, MICRO-ATX / DIMENSIONS: 210 X 349 X 372MM / WEIGHT: 6 KG / RADIATORS: UP TO 240MM / I/O: 1 X AUDIO/MIC, 2 X USB 3.1 GEN1 / DRIVE BAYS: 2.5": 4, 3.5": 1

Carbide 275R

CORSAIR £75

The best budget PC case

4 One of Corsair's newest cases, the Carbide 275R might just be the ultimate minimalist's case. Aside from a small 'sail' logo on the front panel, the 275R ditches additional branding for the sake of a clean design for the style-obsessed. While the design may be minimal, the functionality is anything but.

Unlike NZXT's minimal S340, the Carbide 275R can support a 360mm radiator in the front and up to six 120mm fans. With a modest price tag, the 275R is a great case for beginners as well as advanced users looking to create a sleek custom loop.

Painted black to match the exterior, the interior of the Carbide 275R is rather spacious for a mid-tower ATX case. There are two large cable pass-through holes with rubber grommets in the motherboard tray and one in the top of the PSU tunnel. The hole at the upper left hand edge of the motherboard tray is specifically designed for routing fan cables and the ATX12V/ EPS12V power cable.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Minimal branding
- ⊕ Full-length dust filters
- ⊕ Great cooling support
- ⊖ Lacking cable management space

SPECS FORM FACTOR: MID TOWER / MOTHERBOARDS: MINI-ITX, MICRO-ATX, ATX / DIMENSIONS: 460 X 211 X 455MM / WEIGHT: 10.14KG / RADIATORS: UP TO 360MM / I/O: 1 X AUDIO/MIC, 2 X USB 3.0 / DRIVE BAYS: 2.5": 3, 3.5": 2



Obsidian 1000D

CORSAIR **£470**

The best high-end PC case

5 The Corsair Obsidian 1000D is a behemoth of a PC case that is ready to house the biggest and baddest systems. Standing tall at a staggering 695mm, this 'super tower' features enough space to have 18 fans and up to four massive radiators installed at the same time.

In addition to the stellar cooling support, the 1000D features a unique triple-chamber design with convenient storage compartments and telescoping radiator trays for easy installation.

Of course there is also an RGB lit front panel I/O with built-in smart lighting and fan control

courtesy of Corsair's built-in Commander Pro controller. Build in two systems, and each gets its own front panel controls.

The Obsidian 1000D is massive, and meant to pack as much hardware as possible into its monstrous-yet-elegant chassis. The Obsidian 900D was long the top choice for over-the-top builds and it's only fitting the 1000D has come along to knock it off its throne.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Supports just about any crazy build
- ⊕ Can house E-ATX Mini-ITX together
- ⊕ Dual 480mm front radiators
- ⊖ Expensive

SPECS FORM FACTOR: SUPER TOWER / MOTHERBOARDS: ATX, E-ATX, MINI-ITX, SSI EEB, MICROATX
/ DIMENSIONS: 695 X 307 X 693MM / WEIGHT: 29.5 KG / DRIVE BAYS: 2.5": 6, 3.5": 5

Dark Base Pro 900

BE QUIET! **£230**

The best case for modders

6 Originally known for its silent power supplies and fans, Be Quiet! entered the case market with a big splash and has done quite well in the short period of time since its first case launch in 2014. One of its newer cases, the Dark Base Pro 900 remains one of our highly recommended full towers thanks to its sleek design and enthusiast-friendly interior.

The case is large enough for the biggest motherboards and radiators up to 420mm in size. The case also features total modularity with options for an inverted motherboard layout and even some nifty features such as

wireless Qi charging and preinstalled LED lighting.

The water cooling support provides vast options. If you want complete control over the configuration of your build, consider this chassis. But even with such good performance, it's hard to justify the price for this pro version. Buyers who want neither the glass nor the Qi charger will find better value in the non-pro Dark Base 900.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Highly modular
- ⊕ Wireless Qi charger
- ⊕ Extensive cooling support
- ⊖ Expensive

SPECS FORM FACTOR: FULL TOWER / MOTHERBOARDS: E-ATX, XL-ATX, ATX, M-ATX, MINI-ITX / DIMENSIONS: 577 X 243 X 586MM / WEIGHT: 14.39 KG / RADIATORS: UP TO 420MM / DRIVE BAYS: 2.5": 10, 3.5": 5

Alphabet's CEO
Sundar Pichai

Photo by Google

GG, ROBOT

How a team of AI researchers took on all comers at StarCraft II

Anyone who's played a single-player videogame recently – and the chances are you have – will appreciate the very special kind of artificial stupidity necessary to make you feel like you're getting a decent challenge, but that it was your finely honed skills that finally allowed you to triumph rather than pre-programmed flaws in AI strategy.

Putting up a stiff challenge without cheating – no reading the player's inputs, reacting to the first frame of an attack or psychically knowing where his units are – is a difficult thing to code. But what if you wanted your AI to crush all its enemies and see them driven before it? Perhaps becoming good enough at a game to be in the top 98 per cent of players? All without cheating? That would be even more difficult.

A team from Google has done it, however. The AlphaStar AI from DeepMind triumphed over puny humans in a series of blind games (the meatbags had no idea they were playing against an AI) of *StarCraft II* on Battle.net. It did rather well, achieving Grandmaster level and out-performing 99.8 per cent of players on European servers.

StarCraft II has emerged by consensus as the next big challenge for AI now that it's mastered chess, go, and Jeopardy. While IBM's latest supercomputer takes on the Cambridge Union in a debate, the DeepMind team chose

videogames, something perhaps unsurprising since its CEO is one Demis Hassabis, who readers with long memories might recall. Having contributed some level design to Bullfrog's *Syndicate* (1993), Hassabis became co-designer and lead programmer on 1994's *Theme Park*, which went on to sell ten million copies. He was 17 at the time.

AlphaStar runs on Google's proprietary tensor processing units (TPUs), which are application-specific integrated circuits (ASICs) developed specifically for neural network machine learning. These are the same chips that form the back-end of services such as Google Photos, where one can process over 100 million photos a day, and Google Street View, where they, impressively, extracted all of the text in the Street View database in less than five days.

The use of the word 'tensor' naturally throws up comparisons to the tensor cores that enable DLSS in Nvidia's RTX GPUs, but compared to the graphics chip, TPUs are less precise and lack any hardware for texturing and rasterisation but can rattle through high volumes of computation at a remarkable rate. Google deploys its third-generation TPUs in pods of up to 1,024 chips. "Each of these pods is now well over 100 petaflops," said Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google parent company Alphabet, at the company's annual I/O conference in Mountain View, California. "This is what allows us to develop better [machine learning] models, larger models, more accurate models and helps us tackle even bigger problems.



Play to learn

In 2018, Elon Musk's OpenAI think-tank showed that an AI could develop skills just for the love of curiosity rather than for explicit rewards. Taught to be curious, with a drive to experience new things, the AI preferred to watch TV and play videogames, proving that these are good things to do. Or something.

ARTIFICIAL VICTORIES

When robots win



Photo by Carleat English Wikipedia

1 THE TURK

Constructed in 1770 by Wolfgang von Kempelen, this automaton appeared to beat humans at chess. In reality, a small chess master was hidden inside.



Photo by James the Photographer

2 DEEP BLUE

IBM's supercomputer won its first game against a world chess champion, Garry Kasparov, in 1996 in game one of six. Kasparov would go on to win the match 4-2.

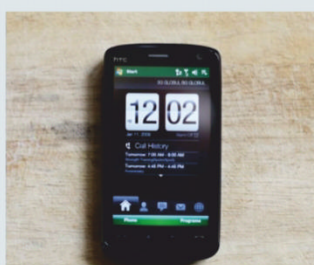


Photo by Daniel Paney

3 POCKET FRITZ

In August 2009, this chess program won the Copa Mercosur tournament with nine wins and one draw. It was running on an HTC Touch HD smartphone.



4 JUDGMENT DAY

Originally on 29 August 1997, the scouring of humans by a self-aware AI keeps changing as Terminator films try new wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey tricks.

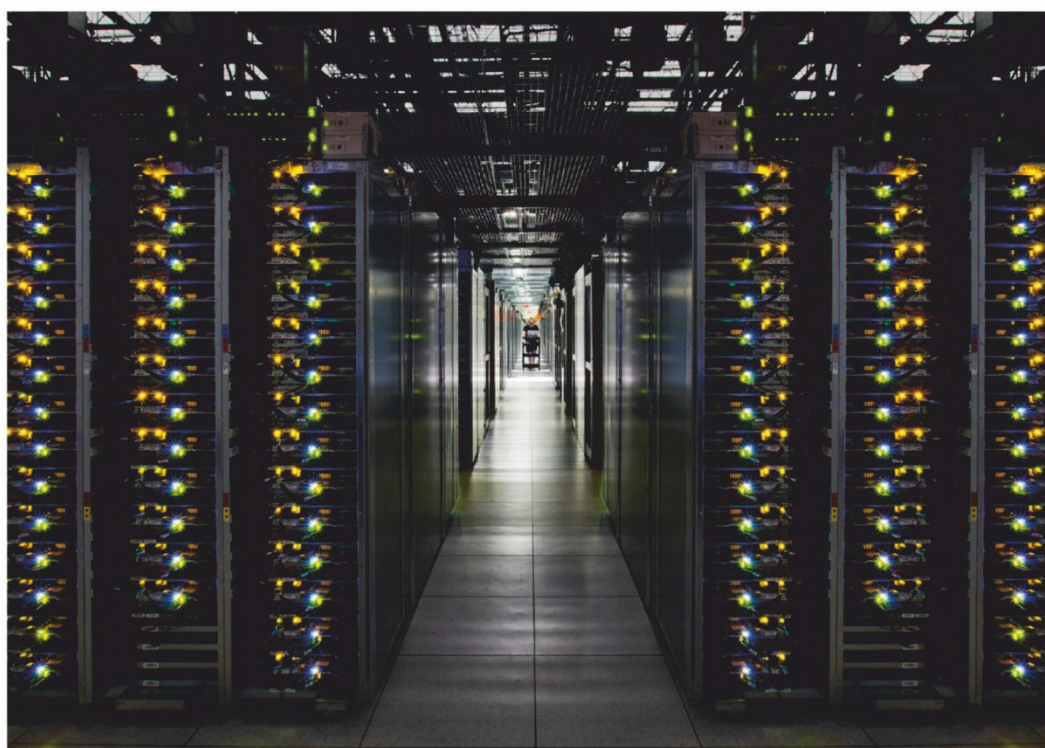


Photo by Google



ABOVE: Inside one of Google's data centres in Douglas County, Georgia, USA.

LEFT: In this *StarCraft II* match, AlphaStar is playing, and beating, Grzegorz 'MaNa' Komincz, the Electronic Sports World Cup 2012 champion.

These chips are so powerful that for the first time we've had to introduce liquid cooling in our data centres."

PLAYING THE FIELD

According to a paper published in the journal *Nature* by the DeepMind team, *StarCraft* "has emerged as an important challenge for artificial intelligence research" thanks to its "enduring status among the most difficult professional esports and its relevance to the real world in terms of its raw complexity and multi-agent challenges". Unlike chess, the sheer number of 'pieces' that are in play in *StarCraft* poses immense challenges to an AI.

The game offers 10^{26} possible legal moves at every time-step – the moments when you stop to think what to do next – and that, to use a technical term, is a lot. Nonetheless, the AI was limited to making its moves at human speed, forcing it to triumph through developing winning strategies rather than blasting its human opponents with a series of superhumanly fast manoeuvres.

Indeed, the DeepMind team had to repeatedly change the usernames that their AIs were hiding behind, because other players noticed that the three (one for each *StarCraft II* race) agents had played the same number of matches, and were carrying out actions with a speed and precision beyond that of mere synapse-based neural pathways. This led to further restrictions being placed on the AI and a rotation of usernames to keep opponents in the dark over who they were really playing against.

THE GAME OFFERS 10^{26} POSSIBLE LEGAL MOVES AT EVERY TIME-STEP

AlphaStar began its training by watching anonymised human games released by Blizzard. It began to imitate the strategies, and was soon able to defeat the game's built-in AI at Elite level around 95 per cent of the time. Of the game's three races, initially Protoss was preferred, although eventually AlphaStar would take on the world with Zerg and Terrans too. Different instances of the AI then began to play games against one another, with branches of successful instances being taken and reintroduced to the league as new players. It only took 44 days of this to train AlphaStar, although DeepMind has estimated that this exposed each AI agent to up to 200 years of realtime *StarCraft II* play.

Before the online matches, the AI was tested against Dario 'TLO' Wunsch, a pro *StarCraft II* player from Germany who plays Protoss at Grandmaster level. AlphaStar beat him 5-0. "I was surprised by how strong the agent was," he said on

DeepMind's blog. "AlphaStar takes well-known strategies and turns them on their head. The agent demonstrated strategies I hadn't thought of before, which means there may still be new ways of playing the game that we haven't fully explored yet."

DeepMind hopes its intelligent systems "will one day help us unlock novel solutions to some of the world's most important and fundamental scientific problems", but taking on the world at *StarCraft* is a serious business in itself, with the prize pool at the 2019 WCS Global Finals tagged at \$500,000. As we went to press, it had not yet emerged what the DeepMind AI intended to spend its prize money on. ■

Ian Evenden

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,161

MOTHERBOARD		B360M-HDV ASRock £70 ASRock's B360M board definitely qualifies as 'no frills', but it'll still get the juice out of your CPU without bottlenecks.
PROCESSOR		Core i3-9100f Intel £80 An incredibly nippy quad-core CPU for the price, Intel's 9th gen budget chip skips integrated graphics for affordability.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 GAMING EVGA £327 Compact, great value, and part of NVIDIA's latest GPU generation, this EVGA model is the budget gamer's best friend.
COOLER		Hyper 212 Evo CoolerMaster £28 Even a budget build can benefit from a good CPU cooler, letting you enjoy a quieter, cooler system.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB Corsair £70 16GB of RAM gives you plenty of breathing room when running multiple programs, and Corsair's selling this kit cheap.
POWER SUPPLY		CX-M Series CX550M Corsair £68 A UK price spike in our previous EVGA 500W pick opens the door for this quiet Corsair option.
SSD		MX500 250GB Crucial £45 Crucial's SSD range is fantastic value and offers good performance, too. A 250GB drive can hold your OS and essential programs.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £38 One terabyte of old-fashioned hard storage is the perfect home for all of your media, backups and storage-hungry games.
CASE		Neos Bitfenix £40 The Neos provides decent airflow, good support for 3.5-inch hard drives, and a fairly painless build experience.
DISPLAY		Optix MAG271C MSI £250 MSI packs huge value into this. You will have to start blaming your k:d on your broadband instead of your refresh rate though.
KEYBOARD		BlackWidow Lite Razer £80 Silent and deadly as its namesake, this BlackWidow board from Razer is a joy to type on. No number pad though, be warned.
MOUSE		Rival 110 SteelSeries £25 A great sensor, simple design and impressively low price make this a great entry-level gaming mouse.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 Deceptively luxurious for the price, Corsair's budget cans offer comfort and powerful low-end. Also colours. Very bright colours.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,693

MOTHERBOARD		Prime Z370 A II Aus £137 Great shielding, full of features, and featuring that – ahem – all important RGB lighting, this is a fine Asus board.
PROCESSOR		Core i7-8700 Intel £315 It's not Intel's very latest chip generation, but the older i7 is still lightning quick and very unlikely to cause a bottleneck.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Twin Fan Zotac £330 Serious power from the 'just about affordable' end of Nvidia's new GPU fleet, and it's ray tracing-ready too.
COOLER		Hydro Series H55 Quiet Edition Corsair £55 Tidy and quiet, the H55 will unlock our CPU's overclocking potential and look good through your case window while it does so.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB (2x8GB) @2666 Corsair £70 16GB is the minimum amount of RAM we'd recommend for a system of this calibre.
POWER SUPPLY		CX 650W Corsair £69 It may not feature fancy modular design, but Corsair's reliable CX 650 is cheap enough to accommodate for our other part picks.
SSD		Evo 860 250GB Samsung £45 Samsung's Evo series has long been a stalwart of nippy r/w speeds and reliability, and this 250GB drive is very affordable.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £38 SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you will need.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 The clean lines, intuitive build features and fantastic price cements the Eclipse as our mid-range case of choice.
DISPLAY		Predator XB271H Acer £360 G-Sync and up to 180Hz of overclocked refresh rate – Acer's 27-inch Predator is quicker than a S1mple AWP peek.
KEYBOARD		One Ducky £100 A lesser known keyboard brand with a great rep among mechanical switch nerds. Ducky delivers the goods with the One.
MOUSE		Model O Minus Glorious £44 The lightest gaming mouse in production and one of the most responsive and comfortable out there. Look at those holes!
HEADSET		HyperX Cloud Kingston £60 Despite the budget price, we recommend this headset. There's simply nothing better for the money.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£3,779

MOTHERBOARD

**Strix X470-F Gaming**Asus **£180**

Get the most from the new AMD Ryzen 2700X with this matching X470 motherboard that's packed with features.

PROCESSOR

**Ryzen 7 3800X**AMD **£365**

AMD continues to tear it up at the top-end of the CPU market, and this 8-core, 16-thread monster laughs at the word 'bottleneck'.

GRAPHICS CARD

**GeForce RTX 2080Ti Black Edition**EVGA **£1,163**

EVGA's custom design is considerably cheaper than Nvidia's reference card, and with great cooling.

COOLER

**Kraken X62**NZXT **£100**

The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favourite things: an infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator and slick braided cooling.

MEMORY

**Ripjaws V 32GB @3200**G.Skill **£172**

G.Skill is always a safe bet for lightning fast RAM, and if you can do without the RGB frills this 2x16GB set will treat you right.

POWER SUPPLY

**HX750i 80 Plus Platinum**Corsair **£119**

Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.

SSD

**XPG SX8200 Pro 1TB**ADATA **£114**

A whole terabyte of M.2 storage with blistering read/write speeds, just waiting to be filled with Steam games you'll never play.

HDD

**WD Blue 4TB**Western Digital **£96**

With a large boot SSD, there's little need for a large, cheap SSD. Instead we've opted for a huge 4TB hard drive for all your bulk data.

CASE

**Enthoo Evolv ATX TG**Phanteks **£170**

The 5mm thick aluminium panels resonate with svelte professionalism, and the interior makes building inside this a dream.

DISPLAY

**AW3418DW**Alienware **£849**

34 inches of curved, beautifully presented 120Hz display with the added benefits of G-Sync. One for aesthetes and athletes alike.

KEYBOARD

**G915 Lightspeed**Logitech **£210**

Those low-profile keys feel like taking your fingers figure-skating. It's wireless too, so that's the cable jam dragon slain.

MOUSE

**G502 Lightspeed**Logitech **£91**

The Lightspeed is the very latest edition of Logi's loveable G502, and while it might look familiar nearly all internal parts are new.

HEADSET

**Virtuoso RGB**Corsair **£150**

Featuring some of the fanciest RGB implementation we've ever seen, Corsair's new luxury cans befit a top-end build nicely.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

Your rooftop is the first place to test your gardening skills.



“The act of gardening is a communal one, and community comes first”

Learning patience and kindness in **MUTAZIONE**

When I first played *Mutazione*, I couldn't quite gel with the rhythm and vibe it was going for. I've played plenty of chill games before, but I've never experienced anything as leisurely as this indie adventure. It calls itself “a mutant soap opera where small-town gossip meets the supernatural”, so I was ready for drama and tea to be spilled. What I wasn't prepared for was to end up consoling a grieving cat lady in a melancholic garden I had grown especially for her.

Gardening has been used as a gameplay and storytelling mechanic in many games. You raise plants and crops for money in titles such as

RACHEL WATTS



THIS MONTH
Escaped into the outlandish fantasy of owning a garden.

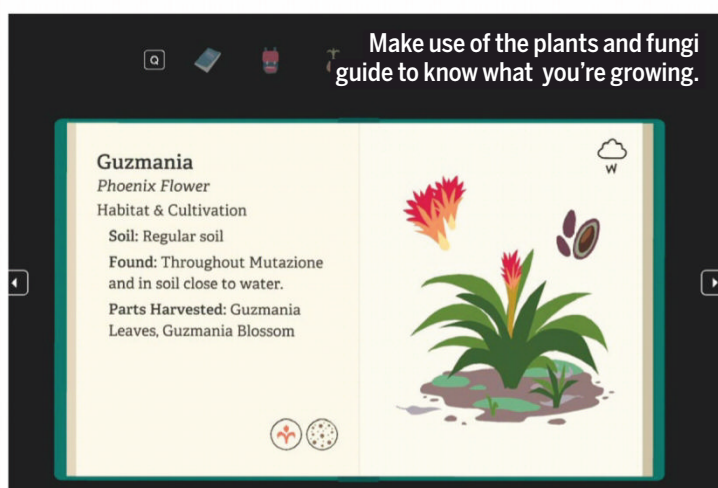
ALSO PLAYED
Still There, *Lost Ember*

Stardew Valley and *The Botanist*, and in the upcoming *Ooblets* you even grow new friends. But in *Mutazione*, it is a purely selfless act. When you plant and nurture a garden, it's because you want to do it for someone else. The act of gardening is a communal one, and community comes first in this world. After a meteor destroyed a holiday resort, the landscape and its survivors started to grow strange mutations.

Joined together by this catastrophic event, a community started to rebuild on top of the ruins in what is now called the Mutazione.

You play as a teenager called Kai who has arrived to care for her sick grandfather, the community shaman. Upon arrival, he gifts her a small drum and asks her to take over his responsibilities as he recovers. Mostly that just means joining the community in looking after one another, and Kai learns that the drum can encourage gardens to flourish.

WITH GARDENING, ONE QUALITY IS OF THE UTMOST IMPORTANCE: PATIENCE



PUSHING UP DAISIES

Gardens have numerous narrative meanings within the story – they’re not just a place to plant flowers. They can be a place of healing, a space to relax and forget problems, or a special haven of privacy and peace between two people.

To grow your garden, you collect seeds from the various weird flora and fauna around the Mutazione. When potted, each plant plays its own quiet, unique motif. When added among a group of its own kind, it joins the garden to create a rich musical ensemble. Each plot is catered to a particular character, and even though years have past since the devastating impact, many still harbour pain and regret.

Mutazione reimagines a post-apocalypse full of life. With gardening, one quality is of the utmost importance – patience. Waiting for something to grow and bloom is a slow and deliberate process. To want immediate gratification is missing the point – that’s the message this game is trying to convey with its slow rhythms and gentle atmosphere.

Mutazione isn’t constantly trying to grab my attention; it’s more interested in slower moments that are truly invested with meaning. The want for a quick reward comes from a place of consumption instead of care. Gardening improves both the garden, the gardener, and, *Mutazione* posits, their community. ■



“A game of gentle satisfactions”

Getting to grips with DOTA UNDERLORDS

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Combined into the three star version of himself

ALSO PLAYED
Mana Spark,
Darksiders Genesis

Last issue, I took an illuminating but disappointing foray into *Hearthstone*’s auto-battler-inspired Battlegrounds mode. This month I thought I’d see if I could use my newly acquired knowledge to finally get to grip with the genre’s beefier frontrunners.

I’m a lapsed *League Of Legends* obsessive, so I figured its spin-off *Teamfight Tactics* would be the auto-battler for me, but if anything my prior experience is a hindrance. Weirdly, Riot has decided to remix its roster for *TFT*, using alt versions of characters with new allegiances.

So, merrily building myself an icy ‘Glacial’ team, I spot Ashe. If there’s one thing I still know about *LoL* it’s that Ashe is the Frost Archer – her defining trait is her freezing arrows. A perfect fit with the rest of my crew!

Except, bafflingly, here Ashe is a ‘Crystal’ character, with no synergy at all with my team. I should have gone for now-inexplicably chilly variants of archaeologist Ezrael and werewolf Warwick. Honestly the genre’s

confusing enough without pulling switcheroos on me.

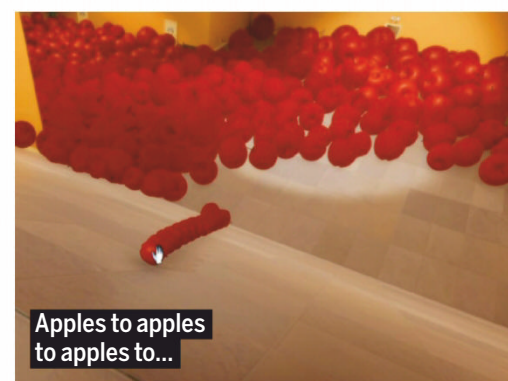
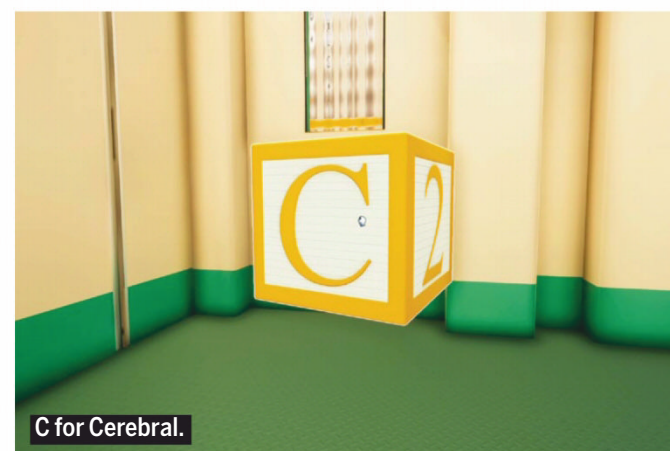
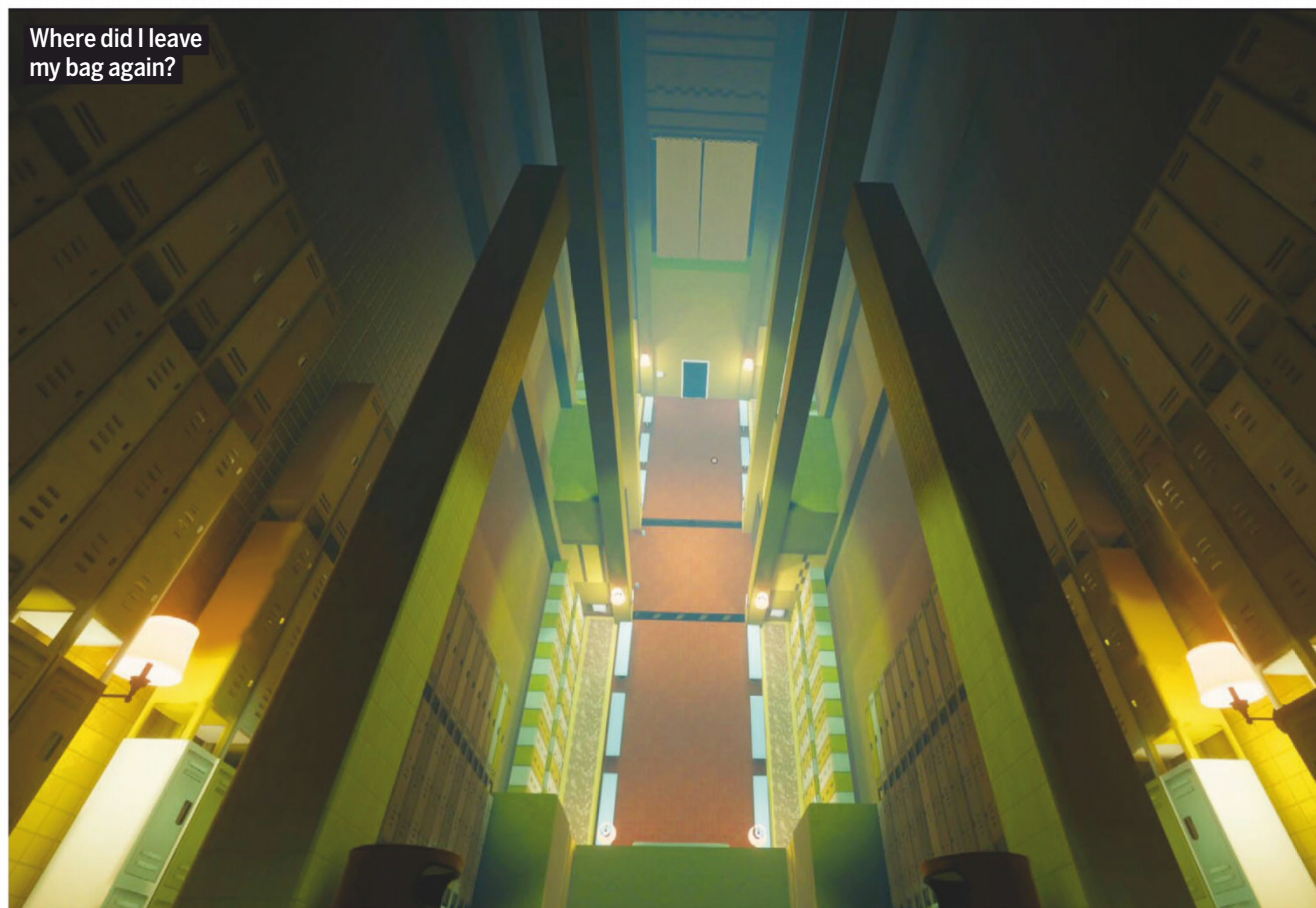
RELEASE VALVE

Suddenly spiteful, I close *TFT* and head over to its most direct competitor: *Dota Underlords*. Despite being clueless about *Dota 2*’s many champions (aside from twinges of recognition of the *Warcraft III* models that inspired them), something about *Underlords* is clearer to me, with a clean interface and more intuitive mechanics. Valve always has been good at polish.

It takes some getting to grips with, but my experience with *Hearthstone Battlegrounds* proves helpful. Without realising it, I’ve already burned the core rhythms and logic of the genre into my brain – learning *Underlords* is just a case of filling in the details around them.

I’m hooked. Auto-battlers create a multiplayer experience like no other. I’m battling seven players, but never really lifting a finger against them – combat is automated, with all the competition existing in the planning stage. The strategy is fast and tense, as I make countless decisions against the clock. But my detachment from the action makes it oddly relaxed.

Underlords is a game of gentle satisfactions and disappointments, not adrenaline and frustration. As my gaming reflexes grow increasingly rusty, I’m grateful to have found my path into a genre that revels in a kind of pleasing passivity. ■



“The challenge is discovering the rules of spacetime in a liminal dream state”

Reality is what you make it in **SUPERLIMINAL**

I’ve duplicated the same apple no less than 400 times. There’s intent here. I can’t carry the apple onto the switch at the top of the ramp I’m standing on. So the goal, from what I can tell, is to duplicate the apple – it’s an apple the size of a baby elephant, mind you – until the fan blowing the apples off the ramp and into the next room can’t anymore. Because there are too many apples in the way.

Once the next room is crammed with fruit, I move my left hand from the keyboard to steady the mouse for some violent, rapid-fire clicking. See, if I click on the apple fast enough, it will duplicate itself up the ramp towards me, growing slightly smaller all the while, until a tiny apple (it maintains the baby elephant weight) arrives on the switch and opens the door at the back of the room allowing me passage into the next tricky mind-punch puzzle box.

Things were simpler back when all I had to do was build a massive staircase out of a few tiny toy blocks. *Superliminal*’s opening bits are confusing enough, navigation puzzles

▶ JAMES DAVENPORT



THIS MONTH
Drowned in an ocean of red fruit.

ALSO PLAYED
I Am Alive,
Death Stranding

that use perspective as a tool for altering reality. If I pick up a toy block from the floor and it appears tiny on the screen, it will stay tiny. But if I get right up next to it, so close that it fills the screen, and then pick it up, it will become as big as it appears: a massive block, perfect for building an impromptu exit. To shrink the thing down, I drop it at the far end of the room so it appears tiny before picking it up. Bloop. It’s little again. Just like my brain.

Sure, the narrative framework is extremely *Portal*-but-dreams-not-exactly-test-chambers (there’s even a sardonic robot narrator that outlines the rules of the layered dream

worlds), but it barely matters. This is a place where sense is besides the point, and *Superliminal* always keeps it just out of reach at all times. I wake up in the same bed, things slightly altered every time, the hope that this reality is reality-reality while knowing full well that I’ll get dumped into a new room of block and chess pieces with their own specific rules for matter and gravity that won’t meet me halfway. It’s OK. I like it when videogames hurt me.

REALITY BITES

Everything is suspect in *Superliminal*. Its realities are, often literally, what you make them. It’s not even a game strictly about puzzles, but walking from room to room. The challenge is in discovering the rules of spacetime in a liminal dream state. One reality pops physical objects into existence from perfectly angled shadows. Another applies the perspective-changing trick to a doorway, so if you enter, make the door smaller, and then find a way to circle back around and enter the door again, you, too, will become little. Darkness can be an exit and walls aren’t always walls (never trust a solid colour). Learning to distrust yourself is the first step towards success. ■

SENSE IS BESIDES THE POINT, AND SUPERLIMINAL ALWAYS KEEPS IT JUST OUT OF REACH

“The alternative to life aboard is drowning or incarceration”

Everyone gets a second chance at death in **ABANDON SHIP**

I love Planky. Not only has she saved my life after my previous ship sunk; she's flotsammed (or maybe jetsammed) me to a friendly port. Because even when things go wrong in Lovecraftian Age-of-Sail-meets-FTL game *Abandon Ship*, there's always a chance the sea will carry you to more lucrative shores.

Unfortunately, there was no room on Planky for the rest of my crew, whose reluctant souls were condemned to the briny deep. And with my ship went most of my gold, which makes hiring a new crew challenging.

It turns out, however, that arsonists, murderers and ne'er do wells come at bargain prices, and my first hire is a disgraced surgeon who's afraid of the dark – a steal at 15 gold, even if his criminal status prevents him from gaining experience.

Welcome aboard, Booker! You remember your hippocratic oath and I'll remember candles. We sail past a drowning sailor, pull them from the sea... it's another surgeon. The deck looks like an episode of ER with rigging. My vessel ends up populated by people I've liberated from prison

MATTHEW ELLIOTT



THIS MONTH
Added a criminal doctor.
Didn't do a Shipman joke.

ALSO PLAYED
Song of Horror,
The Stanley Parable

or the ocean, and mercifully, only two of them are doctors. It means morale is great, if only because the alternative to life aboard is drowning or incarceration. I decide to rename my ship: the Horrible Clam becomes the Second Chance.

The central story of *Abandon Ship* has you escaping from a mysterious cult that worships a subaqueous elder god, but I've diverted from that path – not least because my last ship sunk while I was trying to destroy one of their forts. Instead, I make it my business to sail around looking for gainful, semi-legal employment. I purchase a diving bell for

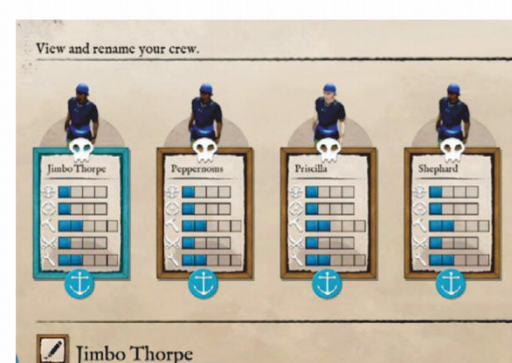
investigating wrecks. I clear pirates from trade routes. I even sail the Second Chance into a stormy sea filled with ghost ships.

HOSPITAL SHIP

Having two surgeons is proving useful. I can patch up my marines mid-fight, which is hilarious to visualise, but handy when we're fighting Haliphron, man-sized aquatic monsters the Cult uses as assault troops. Their ragtag origin stories mean each of my crew feels like they have a history and character, which I love. I'm growing rather attached to a pretend crew in a game with permadeath, but not so attached to prevent me going into battle with a ship beside an active volcano.

Before long, the Second Chance is being showered with molten rock. The only good news is that the enemy ship is, too. A bell sounds warning me that hull integrity is falling, and I ready a hovering finger over the lifeboat button. But all is not lost: one of my discarded marines is an expert at special repairs – that's not why I rescued you, Weller – and his unique skills save the Second Chance. Not today, Planky. But probably tomorrow. ■

I EVEN SAIL THE SECOND CHANCE INTO A STORMY SEA FILLED WITH GHOST SHIPS





UNDERWORLD: ASCENDANT

Has OtherSide succeeded in fixing its immersive sim? *By Rick Lane*

U

nderworld Ascendant was a dream game for me, a fully fledged sequel to the original immersive sim, created by a developer forged from the remnants of *Looking Glass* – creators of *Thief* and *System Shock*. It had the talent. It had the experience. What could go wrong?

The answer, it turned out, was “pretty much everything”. *Ascendant* was terrible, a barely playable fudge of confused mechanics, sluggish movement and interactions, repetitive missions, and a shocking number of bugs. It was also evidently unfinished, with barren, empty environments, a disconnected world-space, and key features of the original *Ultima Underworld*’s design missing, like dialogue trees and rival factions you could interact with.

Apologising for the state of the game at release, OtherSide committed to improving the experience post-launch. Since then, the developer has made four major updates and myriad lesser patches, fixing bugs, adjusting core mechanics, and making some more fundamental changes to how the game functions.

The most significant is to how the world is structured. Previously, the various levels of the Stygian Abyss were entirely separate, accessed via a portal that would take you to the

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	15 November 2018	DEVELOPER	OtherSide Entertainment
PUBLISHER	505 Games	LINK	UnderworldAscendant.com

relevant level for your mission. As of the second update, however, all the game’s levels are connected to one another. They’re still separated by loading screens, but now you can progress from one level to the next, exploring as you like rather than being only able to explore the level for the mission you’re on.

UNDER THE WEATHER

This change comes coupled with an overhaul for how questing works. Originally, *Ascendant*’s quests were picked up from the Midnight Forum, a tavern-like area in the game’s hub of Marcaul. These quests were assigned by different factions, and would provide influence with each of them, required to complete the game’s final mission.

Now, the game places much greater focus on the main story, unlocking new areas of the Abyss as you track down the Abyssal Keys. Quests are also provided differently, with a Saurian named ‘Hapurkala’ setting up a camp in the relevant area, meaning you can return for a new quest without venturing back to Marcaul. Both the main story and

faction missions have also been updated, refining existing quests and introducing new ones. An early example sees you rescuing an Outcast named Fane from a dungeon, who then sets up as a vendor for stealth gear in Hapurkala’s camp.

Alongside these major changes are numerous smaller additions. These include new enemies like the fearsome Shadow Beast, new Runes and Rune formulas for a greater range of spells, and new game mechanics such as Saurian prisoners who can be released to fight alongside you. OtherSide has also spent time squashing bugs and making improvements. Setting things on fire no longer murders your



SADLY, ASCENDANT STILL ISN'T MUCH FUN TO PLAY

framerate, while some of the game’s more egregious glitches are fixed.

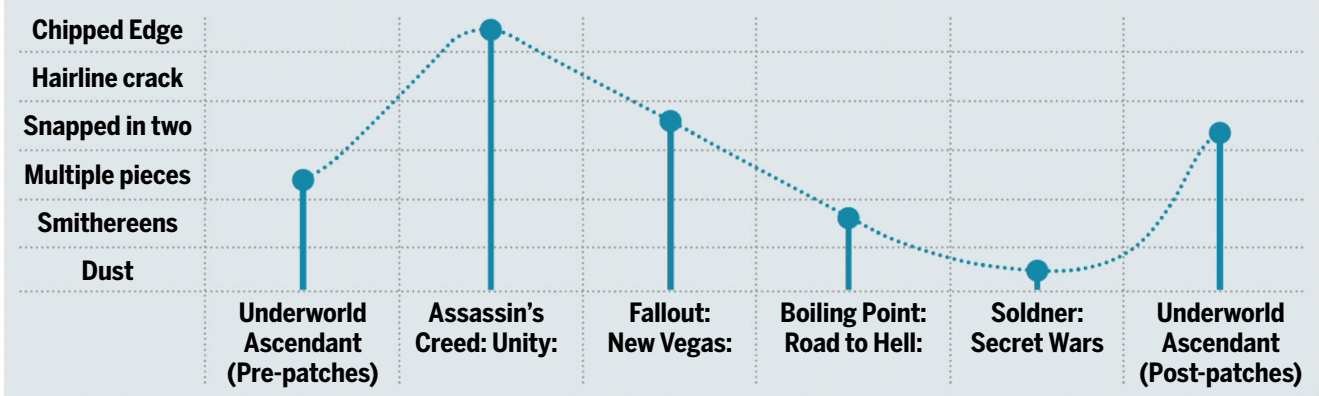
These are all good, necessary improvements. Sadly, none of them change the fact that *Underworld Ascendant* still isn’t much fun to play. Movement is still awkward, combat is clumsy, and stealth is unsatisfying. The physics engine remains dreadful, and trying to climb up the game’s ropes and chains is still like trying to hold onto a snake on amphetamines.

I also hate how so many of the game’s mechanics are deliberately obscured. The Magic system is interesting, but its emphasis on experimentation should focus on using spells, rather than finding out what they are. Meanwhile, the Feats system, which unlocks skill points for performing specific in-game actions, essentially means gaining experience comes down to random chance.

I’m glad OtherSide has strived to improve *Underworld Ascendant*, and I’m comfortable saying that it’s no longer a broken game. Instead, it’s merely a bad one, and there is still a long road ahead before it resembles anything close to the halcyon days of *Looking Glass*. ■

HOW BROKEN IS IT?

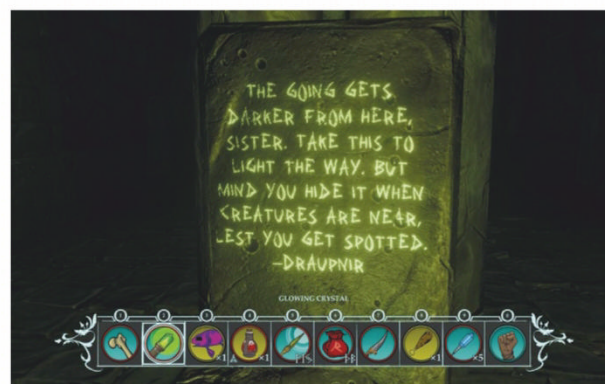
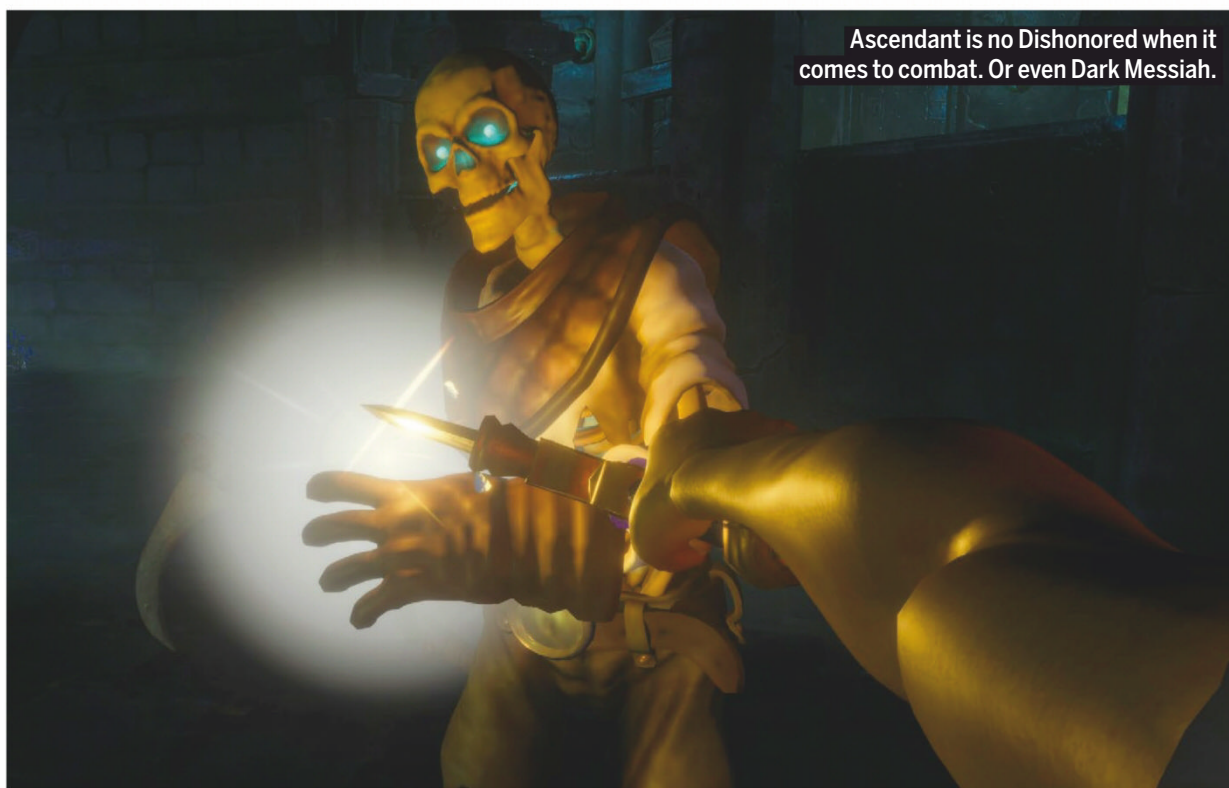
Here’s how it stands in relation to some other infamously busted games.



Levels are now properly interconnected, accessed initially by this staircase in Marcaul.

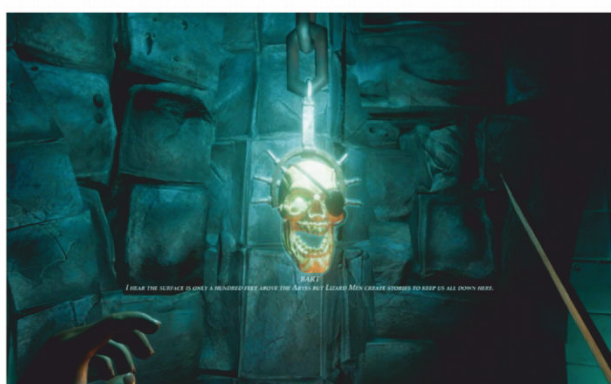


Ascendant is no Dishonored when it comes to combat. Or even Dark Messiah.

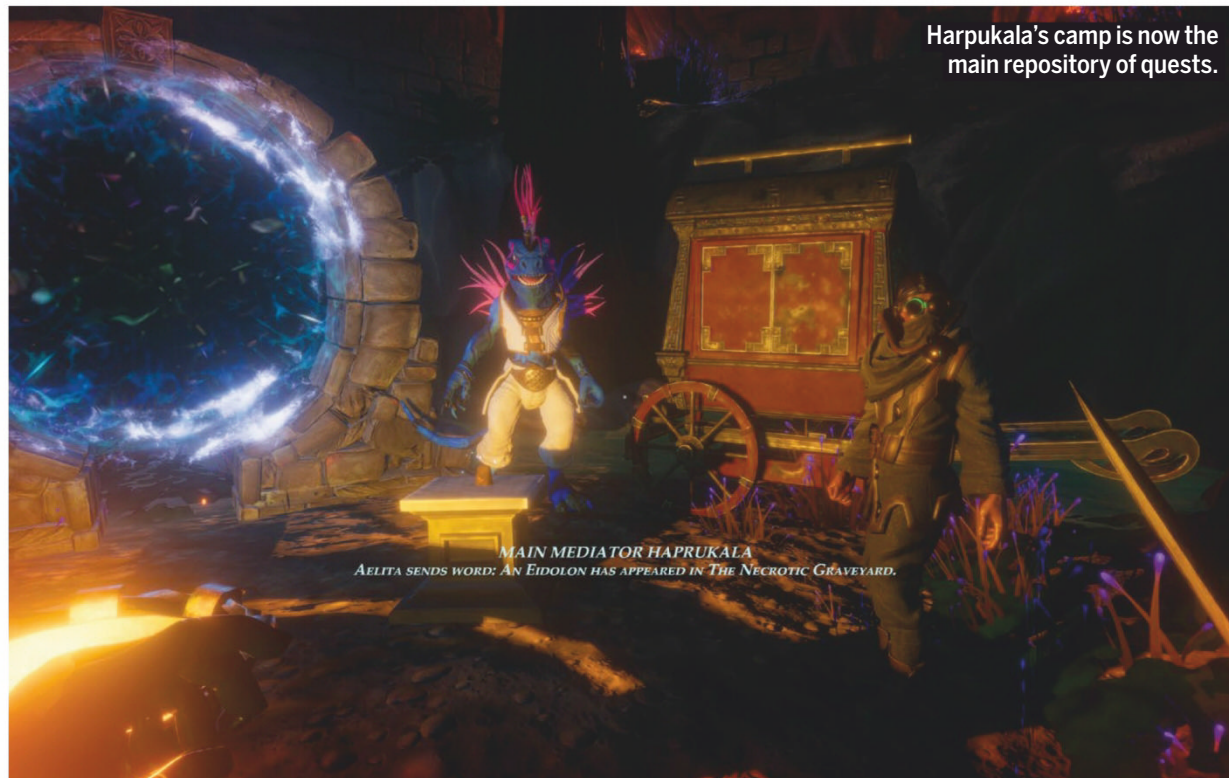


The UI remains an affront to the eyes.

Underworld looks quite pretty in some areas, ugly as heck in others.



Harpukala's camp is now the main repository of quests.





PREPARE FOR ICEBORNE

Pack your warmest belongings for your trip back to *Monster Hunter: World*. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Medium

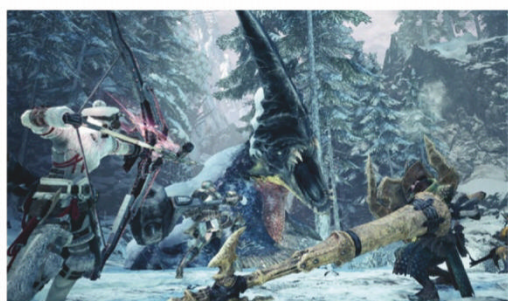
TIME
50 hours

VITAL LINKS

Key info:
bit.ly/2XW9M9V

Monster list:
bit.ly/37HpHxt

Rajang guide:
bit.ly/2pXkbpt



RANK UP

1 Technically all you need to do to access Capcom's frosty expansion content is reach Hunter Rank 16, which you'll do by completing the main story. This will take a hefty 50 hours, but you'll still want to do more preparation on top.



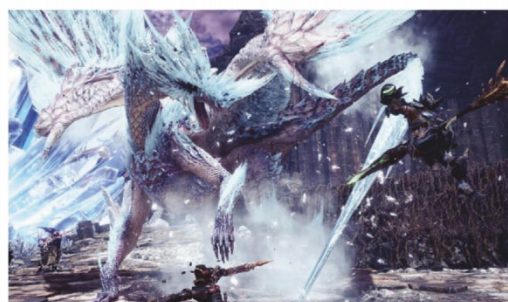
PHONE A FRIEND

2 If *World* is your first taste of the franchise, getting to Master Rank may be a challenge. Use the Hunter Helper system and find experienced hunters to help you through tough scraps, which nets them a reward for their troubles.



FELINE FINE

3 If you prefer to bash beasts about solo, ensure your Palico is as powerful as possible. Earn perks by completing missions for Grimalkynes, such as the ability to help your fluffy buddy turn small monsters into temporary mounts.



PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

4 Videogames are relentless nowadays, so we can understand if you've taken a break from hunting since August. Get your eye in for *Iceborne* by tackling the base game's hardest scraps, like the Nergigante and Vaal Hazak Elder Dragons.

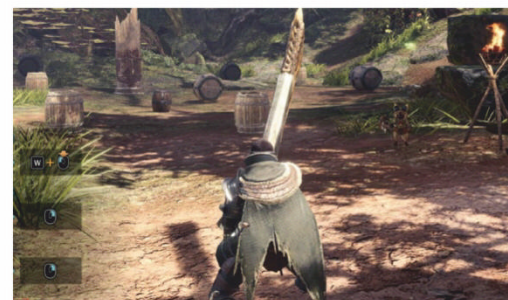


ASSUME THE MANTLE

5 The buffs granted by your Mantles will be essential for the chilly challenges ahead. The Iceproof Mantle offers essential defence against Iceblight, a common affliction in these cold climes.

STOCKPILE HEALING ITEMS

6 Identify where you're lacking in healing items. Focus your farming on the ingredients for mega potions, blight-removing Nulberries and stamina-replenishing steaks.

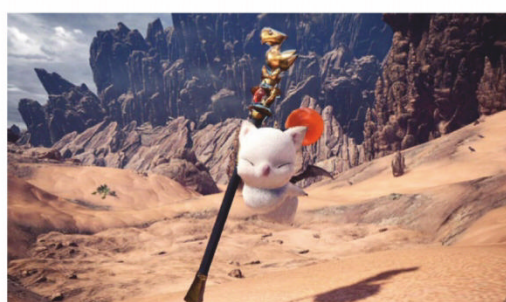


WEAPONS FREE

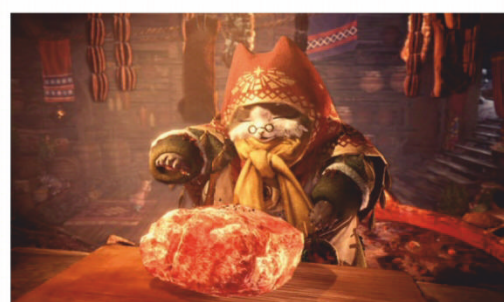
7 With 14 weapon types to choose from in the base game, it can be difficult to settle on just one, but your best chance at surviving *Iceborne* is to pick a favourite, craft the best version of it you can, and max out its level.

(ICE)BORN READY *Prepare yourself for the expansion's three toughest fights***GRAPES OF RATH**

8 Acquire multiple high-powered armours to help you in Master Rank. Get the full Rathalos set, for instance: the Rathalos Mastery bonus boosts elemental damage, pairing nicely with the fire damage you need in *Iceborne*.

**EVENT HORIZON**

9 Capcom regularly collaborates for special, limited-time event quests. They can be themed around other videogame franchises, like *FFXIV* and *The Witcher 3*. These often bestow XP and gear to help you through Hunter Ranks.

**VOLUNTARY WORK**

10 Optional quests, by definition, are not essential to progress, but you'll earn important rewards such as canteen and armour upgrades, and new monsters. Look for NPCs with exclamation marks above their heads to start them.

**A BEST OFFENSE...**

11 Defender armour and weapon sets exist to help PC players get to *Iceborne*. Defender variants of all weapon types can be crafted and upgraded at the Smithy and the special armour boosts health, damage, and, well, defence stats.

**CLUTCH CLAW**

12 This useful bit of *Iceborne* kit is a handy grappling hook you can use in *World's* story, too. It lets you latch onto a monster to drag them towards an environmental hazard, or rappel towards their weak points.

Best seats in the house
outside Dune.



This doesn't look
suspicious at all.

ELSWEYR ANEQUINA

Adding the Khajiit lands to *Oblivion*. *By Lauren Morton*

I'm supposed to be stealing keys from several merchants in Leyawiin, but things haven't exactly gone to plan. I accidentally wore my Grey Fox mask, a piece of armour that immediately marks me as a wanted criminal to every guard I pass. Even after finally sorting out my armour situation and making my way into Southern Books, the shopkeeper Bugak gro-Bol isn't in bed when I enter and won't stop following me around and trying to kick me out of his shop, because it's midnight and I look like exactly the kind of shady character who might be breaking in to steal from him.

These are the same hapless adventures that I remember going on in *Oblivion*, but this time my Khajiit character isn't out thieving at the behest of Cyrodiil's Thieves Guild. I've already worked my way to the top of that organisation and become the Grey Fox myself. I'm back at the bottom of the totem pole now, working for a brand-new guild based in the modded territory of Elsweyr.

MEET THE KHAJIIT

Wherever game developers leave loose lore on the ground, modders

are always sure to pick it up and incorporate it. Khajiit lore in the *Elder Scrolls* games is varied and colourful, but has almost always been relegated to tomes and dialogue from cat-like merchants. Although the Khajiit homeland did appear in *The Elder Scrolls: Arena*, it didn't show up again in a proper Elder Scrolls game until an expansion to *The Elder Scrolls Online* in 2019. In the meantime, modders have soaked up all the spare Khajiit facts available and designed the territory themselves.

One of the earliest fan-made forays into the Khajiit homeland is '*Elsweyr The Deserts of Anequina*', originally published in June of 2009 by a Nexus Mods user called Iliana and including the work of dozens of other modders. I didn't play *Oblivion* in 2006 when it released, but even 13 years later I can still intensely feel the

THIS TIME MY KHAJIIT ISN'T OUT THIEVING AT THE BEHEST OF CYRODIIL'S THIEVES GUILD

awe that its opening fanfare and drawn-out 3D pan around the Imperial City must have inspired. In the same way I can appreciate how great a feat *Elsweyr Anequina*'s giant open expanse and huge cast of NPCs and quests are, despite playing through them ten years later.

Anequina begins with a book, as plenty of mods do. It appears in my inventory to describe all the cities and quests available to me in the new territory. I also have to make sure I've turned off *Oblivion*'s default in-game borders that prevent me from exploring beyond the normal bounds of Cyrodiil. With that done, I'm able to wander across the southern border of the world and directly into Elsweyr over a bridge west of Bravil.

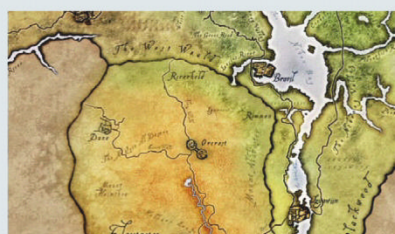
Riverhold's main bridge isn't a fall risk if you always land on your feet.



Big cats stalk the big city.



LOCAL COLOUR *Other mods that pair well with this dish*



COLOUR MAP MOD

The popular *Colour Map Mod* for *Oblivion* makes the base game map more lively. Another modder created a map for Anequina in the same style, so I didn't have to live with a washed-out Elsweyr.



ELSWEYR PELLETINE

A modder has created a more recent companion to *Anequina* called *Pelletine*, named after the southern half of Elsweyr. It adds additional cities and explorable areas not included in *Anequina*.



KHAJIIT PREDATORS

This mod allows you to create a larger Khajiit warrior character with higher strength. Although the mod calls them 'predators', they look like the very tall, stocky Pahmer Khajiit seen in *The Elder Scrolls Online*.

>> The first town I travel through is Riverhold, just over the southern border. It's not immediately different from Cyrodiil – still lots of green, with bushes and waterfalls like other areas of *Oblivion*'s base game. Inside town though, I'm quickly face to face with all the various 'furstocks' of Khajiit. Most had never been seen in an Elder Scrolls game before, only described, and were left up to the imagination and resourcefulness of modders involved with *Anequina*.

Riverhold is full of Khajiit that lore-buffs will recognise, though they can't possibly compare with the renditions from Bethesda's own creations in *The Elder Scrolls Online*. Cathay, one of the playable races of most Elder Scrolls games, mingle with Ohmes, which have physical and facial features of Bosmer elves, just with fur on top. The house cat-like Alfiq and big cat Senche both seem to be based on the same cougar-esque large cat model, but scaled down and up respectively.

Whether by design choice or technical concern, neither Alfiq nor Senche can be spoken to. Other Khajiit speak plenty, though of course their voiced lines are only greetings like "Hello there!" and other small phrases that already existed in *Oblivion*'s base game for its Khajiit characters. Their more specific lines for quest giving are all text only. Elder Scrolls lore suggests that the scholarly Alfiq dislike speaking in front of outsiders, creating rumours that they are actually mute. I suppose my Khajiit thief is an outsider to them after all.

SANDY SIGHTSEEING

Beyond Riverhold, green shrubbery gives way to the arid desert that the northern region of Elsweyr – *Anequina*, as the mod is named after – is known for. Grassy hills quickly turn into steep sand dunes ringed with narrow walking paths that, to *Anequina*'s credit, feel as if they belong with the rest of *Oblivion*'s

topology. Thanks to its notoriously floaty physics, it's easy to break a leg stumbling down a dune while pursued by one of the many new monsters added in the mod.

The desert is dangerous, it turns out. In true *Oblivion* fashion, I learn the region's fauna by running away from them at full tilt, turning back every so often to fire arrows into their knees. The desert is swamped with giant tarantulas, aggressive Alfiq, elephants that seem majestic and calm but absolutely are not when you get close enough, orc bandits, and many other things that want to kill me. It brings back fond memories of being chased by two very persistent



IN TRUE OBLIVION FASHION, I LEARN THE REGION'S FAUNA BY RUNNING AWAY FROM THEM

wolves all the way from Bruma to Skingrad. Even a few remote villages of tribal Khajiit are hostile as soon as I got near their gates.

In between running from oversized arachnids, *Anequina*'s fully featured towns each have their own distinct design. In Dune there are camels for sale, and giant golden towers that look like a mosque on a postcard presiding over the open market in the lower half of the city. Riverhold is a treetop city of wooden homes all climbing the same waterfall topped with a modest lodge that calls itself a palace. Corinthe is a small town maze of back streets all branching from a central market, and its mostly single-story architecture crisscrossed with makeshift plank bridges between rooftops is the perfect hunting ground for the local Thieves Guild.

Compared with the Elsweyr I know from *The Elder Scrolls Online*, *Anequina* offers something a bit

different. *ESO*'s wide-open world and detailed cities are beautiful, but all give me architectural fatigue. The steeply curved roofs that I've come to associate with the Khajiit thanks to that game are a constant presence in all of its cities in Northern Elsweyr. *Anequina* features so much more contrast and more varied sources of inspiration thanks to all the different modders contributing to the buildings and city designs of the area.

KHAJIIT HAS QUESTS

It isn't all just exploration, of course. There are two dozen new quests and a few guilds to join. As in *Oblivion*, not all quests are of grand scale. In Riverhold my first encounter is with a man looking for his lost child. Solving this small mystery involves asking around town and using *Oblivion*'s odd speechcraft minigame to increase residents' disposition towards me to eventually pry information out of them.

Outside town is a Khajiit highwayman not so committed to his task who simply gives up when I refuse to hand over the 400 gold coins he demands. Further into the desert I stumble over the dead body of a Khajiit lying next to a golden lamp. Having learned no lessons from pop culture whatsoever, I pick up the lamp and a dremora genie pops out to offer me a wish. Apparently I'm not averse to deals with demons because I wish, of all things, for love. I'm granted a random NPC friend for my trouble and the genie, now contractually freed from caring about my wants or needs, proceeds to attack.

With that problem behind me, I pull out my *Anequina* guide book again, the tome that started it all. I seem to remember seeing mention of the Thieves Guild. As the Grey Fox of Cyrodiil I find it only right that I should visit the local chapter and see what dark work needs doing. That's where my great struggle lifting keys from the pockets of merchants in Leyawiin begins. In all my time traipsing about Elsweyr I've entirely forgotten how to be a proper thief. I do eventually manage to steal all three requested keys and return them to my new dispatcher Jinsiraga in Corinthe. After that I'm off to steal some horses, naturally.

These are only the beginning of my adventures in the *Oblivion* version of Elsweyr. *Anequina* understands *Oblivion*'s playfulness with its lazy highwaymen and desert genies. If not for having to install *Anequina*, I'd have never known it wasn't part of *Oblivion* in the first place. ■

ELSEWHERE IN ELSWEYR *The Khajiit cities outside Anequina*



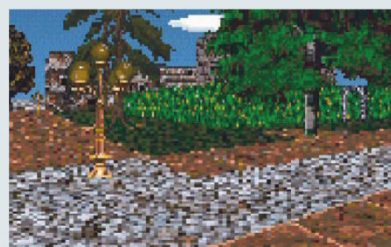
RAWL'KHA

Rawl'kha was present in *ESO* prior to the Elsweyr expansion.



SENCHAL

In *ESO*, Senchal has been beset with dangerous wildfires.



TORVAL

The city-state seat of the Mane has only been seen in *Arena*.

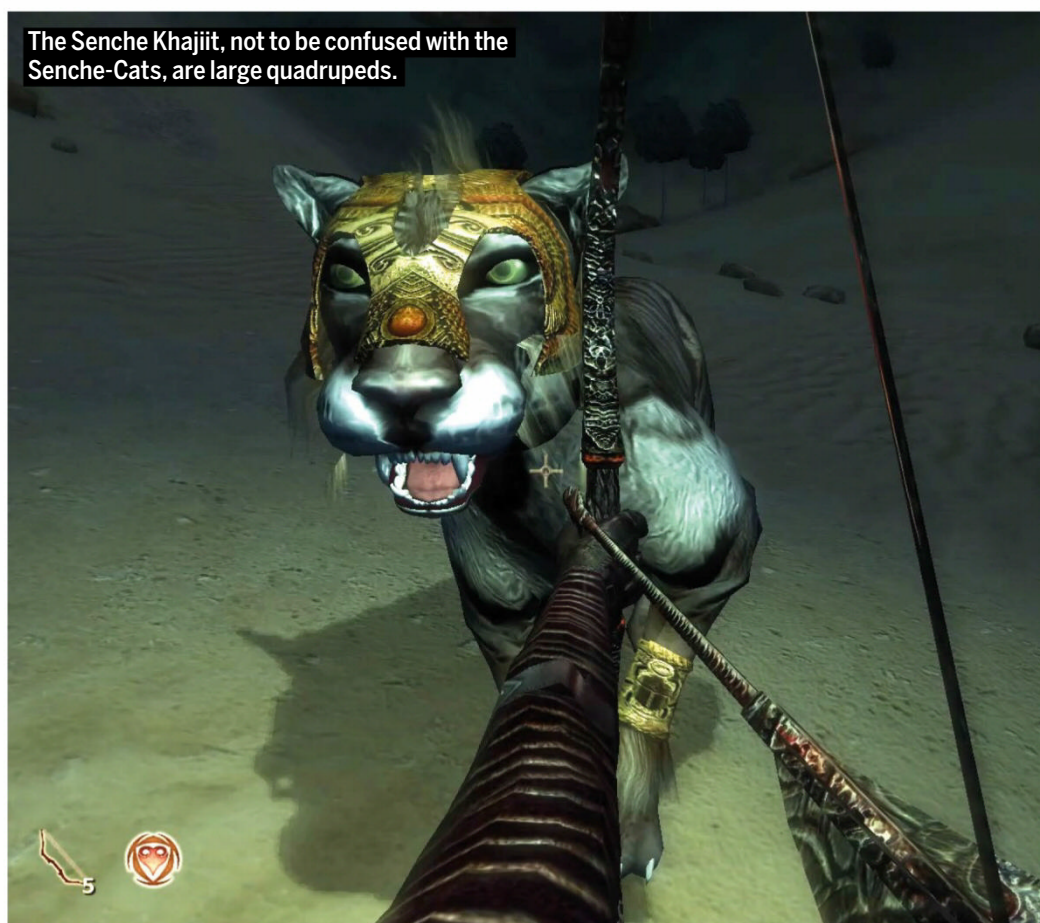
Elsweyr's topology is often a fall hazard.



A camel doesn't compare to Shadowmere, but when in Dune.



The Senche Khajiit, not to be confused with the Senche-Cats, are large quadrupeds.



Eye-level with the Alfiq in Riverhold.





ENFORCING CAPITALISM IN THE OUTER WORLDS

PART II

Taking the lift all
the way up.

By Jeremy Peel

THE RULES

1 Never do your own dirty work.

2 Cut costs and turn a profit for the company.

3 Live by the company's values.

Every boy at business school dreams of Byzantium. The city where the space doors whoosh open instead of screech. Where you can see your own face in the floor and the lifts are gilded with gold. Golly, do they need lifts! Some of those offices go all the way up to the 62nd floor, which is a handy shorthand for hierarchical rank. What use is status if others can't see it?

Byzantium is the residence of The Board, unlike Edgewater, which is merely the residence of The Bored. That's the joke I plan to make at the bar once I arrive. But first I need to prove myself to the consortium of corporations that run the Halcyon colony.

My current predicament is less than glamorous. I'm grounded on a docking station, my ship impounded by the same Board I'm seeking to impress. But the red flag on my passport has granted me one advantage: an urgent appointment with the Board's local ambassador, Udom Bedford.

As I step through customs into the great rusty cavern called Groundbreaker, the face of Phineas Welles comes through on the codec. His frazzled haircut does not mark him out as a serious person. "Remember," he says. "Don't trust the Board. They'll try to win you over with promises of wealth and power..." I don't hear the rest. What's so wrong about wealth and power? Welles might have unfrozen me from cryostasis, but he's proven to be a shocking business partner since. It's time to trade him in for another.

The embassy for the Halcyon Holdings Corporation Board sits in the back corner of Groundbreaker's promenade, a shred of class among the scrap merchants and pirate boozers. Back when Halcyon was colonised, Groundbreaker was the first ship to arrive. But its crew decided it didn't fancy putting in the hours and declared itself an independent port – even as it breathed artificial air courtesy of the Board. Ever since, the corps have tolerated Groundbreaker, allowing it to skim off the top of their interstellar shipments.

Without honest work though, the soul gets sick: that's what my shift with Spacer's Choice has taught me, and that sickness is made manifest on Groundbreaker. The air conditioning is on the fritz. The residents are boiling like lobsters in the pot.

"I'm required by Board bylaws to use excessive force," a guard warns loiterers on the embassy steps, but doesn't bother my entourage as we pass. Perhaps it's the air of business I carry with me. Or maybe it's the gigantic Moon Man mask Vicar Max carries on his head, representing Spacer's Choice wherever we go, like a football mascot.

The embassy is, as one local suggested, a "glorified shoebox" – terribly grand yet awfully small. Bedford's office scarcely fits his computer and three bodyguards. All the better to make room for a luxury stateroom in the back, reserved for Chairman Rockwell's use should he ever visit, which he won't.

Bedford himself is a complex figure – a sentimentalist whose proud moustache conceals a wobbly bottom lip. Still, I can smell Byzantium on his suit. I offer Phineas Welles, wanted terrorist, in exchange for a navkey to the capital.

The ambassador's eyes widen. Welles is his white whale – or as he pronounces it, 'hwhite hwhale'. The travel ban is gone in an instant. But turning Welles in, and passage to Byzantium, will require Bedford's official Board seal, which he's pawned to fund a series of self-produced adventure serials.

It's an unforgivable lapse in professional judgement, and worse, it's going to cost me money: 8,000 Bits, to be exact. Not likely, since parting with company cash is against my moral code. If only there were a way to pay for the seal with something belonging to somebody else – like the trade secrets of rival corporations.

INSIDER TRADING

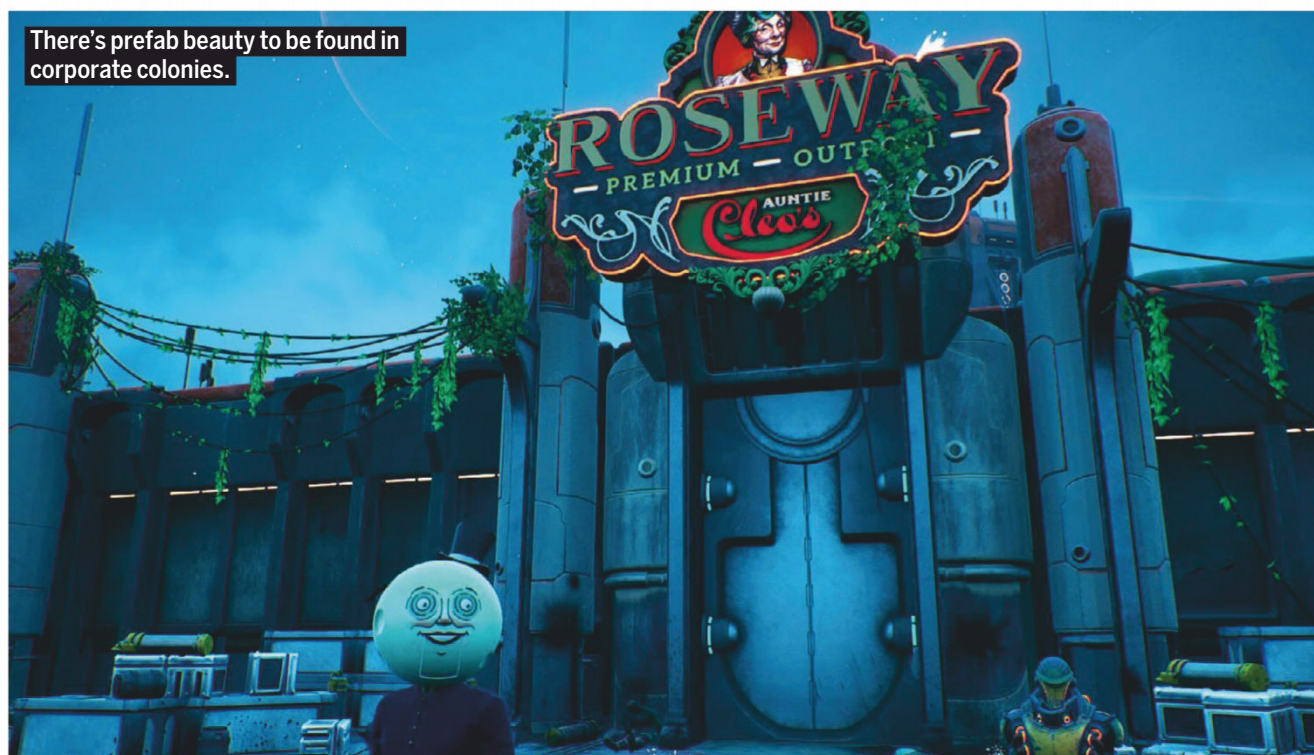
The search takes me back to Terra 2. Last time I was here, everybody was shouting. I'd switched all the electricity in Emerald Vale over to Edgewater, pushing a community of deserters back to town and their jobs with Spacer's Choice. It was good for their souls, and they'll thank me eventually, but I don't much fancy returning in the

meantime. Fortunately we'll be landing on the opposite side of the planet, far enough away not to hear their screams. Specifically we're visiting Roseway Gardens, a big pharma R&D station run by the Auntie Cleo corporation. It's been thrown into chaos by anti-corp terrorism, and out of that question mark comes profit. For me, at least.

Roseway Gardens is beautiful, after a fashion – its green trees blending into a blue sky padded by pink clouds. It's starkly multi-coloured, like a strip of toothpaste, which incidentally is what they manufacture here. The streets are less than minty fresh though, littered by the corpses of corporate cops. Many of them have chunks missing, which I'm pretty sure constitutes theft of company property.

I OFFER WELLES, WANTED TERRORIST, IN EXCHANGE FOR A NAVKEY

There's prefab beauty to be found in corporate colonies.





GRIFT AID

The Outer Worlds' best brands for your consideration



**MOCK
APPLE**
"Real mock
apple. Real
mock taste."



**NANNER
SPANK**
"Parents,
Spank your
children!"



**LEMON
SLAPP**
"Slapp your
whole family
tonight!"



**PRE-SLICED
BRED**
"It tastes fresh
because it
was!"



**CYSTYPIG
TUMORS**
"Falling off the
backs of
cystypigs!"

» Once in town I catch up with R&D director Anton Crane, an Eddie Redmayne type and panicker. The terrorists have let the raptidons out of their cages, which explains the trail of limbs I've followed from the ship. It was Crane who put out the distress call that led me here, and now regrets it, since his illegal diet toothpaste research is likely to be exposed.

Crane has been secretly introducing raptidon digestive acid into the evening meals of randomly selected workers and observing the effects.

It's cheap out-of-hours research, and it's smart; less so the decision to tell me about it. If I can get hold of his work, I can fund my ticket to Byzantium and undermine a Spacer's Choice competitor into the bargain. Crane's body can be the first counterweight in the lift that takes me up to that 62nd floor.

Under the pretext of help, I have Crane direct me to his lab, as well as the building where his assistant still cowers, frightened and abandoned. The latter proves to be a dead end, since the man is trapped in his own office behind a locked door. Buying more lockpicks would involve hacking the vending machine downstairs, but there's no way I'm circumventing Spacer's Choice software. They're the corporation that got me this far, and

what good are company values if you don't stick to them? I can hear the assistant yelling as I leave, but his voice is muffled by the door, his face obscured by frosted glass. He's a company man; I'm sure he understands.

The lab, when I find it, is under siege. An Auntie Cleo response team has been dispatched to the scene, but has stalled in the lobby; the enforcers are now at an impasse with the terrorists and the raptidons, though it's debatable whether the latter even know how to stand, let alone have a stand-off. I take the side door and begin rummaging through papers and terminals, taking anything that sounds sensitive and sellable.

That's when I happen upon Cassandra O'Malley, the terrorist leader, locked in an unguarded cell. She's here simply because she wanted to know what it'd feel like to make an anti-establishment choice. How's your freedom taste now, Cass? That's right: like lizard-flavoured toothpaste.

It transpires Cassandra has the crucial Crane research I'm after. She offers to go halves if I clear a route for her to make a French exit, but I'm not about to start unlocking doors now. Besides, she's making all these noises about "stabbing at the heart of corporate power".

I don't much care for Auntie Cleo, but the heart of corporate power is where I want to be. What if Cassandra's waiting when I get there?

Just enough pellets from Vicar Max's shotgun make it past the bars, and Cassandra slumps to the floor. The research I retrieve from her fallen form is undamaged, and what's more I get both halves. Cleo's crack team and the remaining terrorists can have each other. The corporation will restore order, and be none the wiser about the secrets they've lost.

On my way out, I happen across the raptidon matriarch Crane specifically warned me was crucial to further research. But, as any economist would tell you, his stolen work becomes more valuable to my buyers if it can't be reproduced. And the Spacer's Choice company handbook does teach that the natural world is ours to conquer. Nice lab lizard you've got there. Would be a shame if something... happened to it.

INTO BYZANTIUM

Back aboard Groundbreaker, I meet with the station's secret broker, a kindly old woman named Gladys. She offers me candy, and I offer her experimental rocket research. Sure, toothpaste can't power rockets, but sometimes a lie fetches a higher price than the truth.

Bedford's relief spreads through his moustache as I hand him the Board seal. I've saved his hide. He approves my journey to Byzantium and immediately sends the authorisation forms through to Sophia Akande, the adjutant to Chairman Rockwell and the most powerful woman in Halcyon.





Obsidian has been saving up its allowance of ragdoll physics.

The key word being ‘immediately’, given what I’m about to do. The adventure serials Bedford has been producing in his spare time essentially constitute fanfiction. And he knows as well as I do that breach of copyright in the colony is punishable by death.

The guards fall first under Parvati’s hammer – too quickly, if I’m honest. I’d hope for better security in my own future Board roles. The good vicar lifts his shotgun, and Bedford raises his hands in response, but it’s too late – the best blocks at his disposal were bureaucratic, and they’re spent now. The bullets impact his chest, as well as my reputation with the Board. They’ll understand in time, once they know what Bedford was up to.

I take his passcodes and then the lift, gilded with gold, that leads to the Chairman’s quarters. Upstairs, the doors whoosh instead of screech, and I can see my own

face in the floor. What catches my eye though, is an elaborate light fitting: a ladder of spokes leading all the way up to the ceiling.

“I find myself marvelling at the complex simplicity of the Fibonacci spiral,” Vicar Max is prone to saying. “I’m sure you know what that’s like.” I do now. This is the hierarchy I’m meant to climb up.

Outside, on the balcony that overlooks Groundbreaker’s promenade, I let the rising heat wash over me.

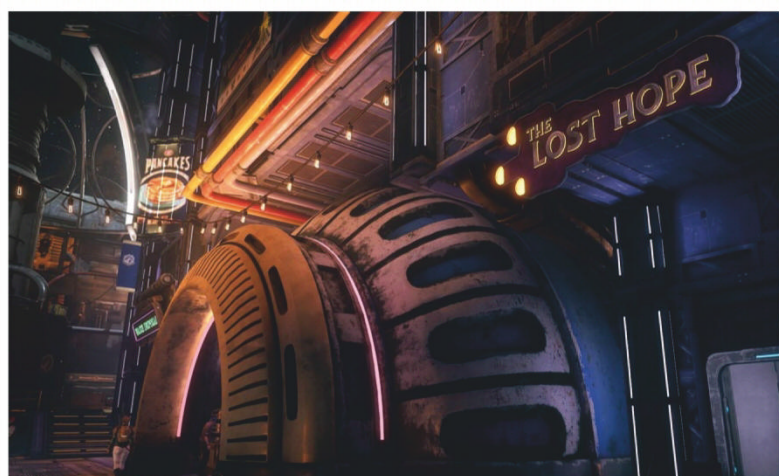
The adverts for Auntie Cleo drugs, Spacer’s Choice guns, and Rizzo’s alcohol all blend together in a neon haze –

reminiscent of central Osaka back on Earth.

I realise then: it’s not each other the corps are fighting. The only real competition is between us up here, and them down below.

Then I sleep in the chairman’s bed. ■

SHE OFFERS ME CANDY, AND I OFFER HER EXPERIMENTAL ROCKET RESEARCH



If you have enough money, you can build Cyrodill anywhere.



REINST

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



Illustration Jun Sterni



Combat is a lot like a traditional JRPG.

FINAL FANTASY XI

Revisiting one of the greatest MMOs of our time. *By Steven Messner*

Playing *Final Fantasy XI* after all these years is a lot like returning to your hometown only to find it desolate and different. All the old buildings are still there, but the faces aren't the same. And that feeling I had – that indescribable sense of belonging – is gone too. It's a bit alienating and tragic, to be honest, but really what else should I expect from an MMO that's almost 20 years old and clearly nearing the end of its days?

Though I was never as obsessed with *Final Fantasy XI* as I was other MMOs like *World of Warcraft*, I can still vividly remember the summer months I spent playing it. My love for *Final Fantasy XI* is the definition of a summer romance. All I wanted to do was spend my time adventuring across the lush fields of Vana'diel, but my parents decided that wasting my break playing videogames was a bad idea, so they regulated my playtime to a few precious hours each day. But I wasn't going to give up that easily.

I found an old 11-inch TV-VCR combo set buried in our storage closet and hid it in my room. After everyone had gone to bed, I'd quietly grab my PlayStation 2 and bring it to my bed, plug it in, and play *Final Fantasy XII* until the sun came up – until the day my mom's mischief detector finally got her attention and

she busted me and refused to keep paying the monthly subscription fee.

Maybe that's what's missing now, I think as I walk the streets of Windhurst trying to reacquire myself. But I know that's not entirely true. *Final Fantasy XI* wasn't great because playing it was against the rules, it was great because it was an MMO built from the ground up to encourage cooperation and friendship. A relic of an era before *World of Warcraft* ruined the entire genre by being too popular.

OLD RELICS

Unearthing what makes *Final Fantasy XI* great doesn't just require a shovel, you need a damn excavator. Before I could even log in, I had to wrestle with the infamously complicated PlayOnline service, an esoteric artefact in itself. Back when *Final Fantasy XI* launched on the PlayStation 2 online services were beyond rudimentary, especially on a



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
2002

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
playonline.com/ff11us

IT WAS BUILT FROM THE GROUND UP TO ENCOURAGE COOPERATION



» console that wasn't really designed with internet multiplayer in mind. That's why *Final Fantasy XI* came bundled with a 40GB hard drive and a network adapter.

PlayOnline was an ambitious push to normalise online console gaming. Square Enix designed it to be a kind of platform for all of their multiplayer games and it included ambitious social features for the time, like personal email accounts. It was Steam for the PlayStation 2.

Today, though, PlayOnline is an enormous burden. Even the simple act of registering an account feels like an arcane ritual. PlayOnline ID, PlayOnline member name, PlayOnline password, Square Enix ID, Square Enix password – you probably need them all at one point or another just to get access to *Final Fantasy XI*. Menus and prompts are so confusingly arranged that more than once I found myself in some weird dead-end corner of PlayOnline with absolutely no real clue how to get where I was going.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Like many older MMOs, *Final Fantasy XI* is virtually unplayable in its original state. Its

graphics engine can't count pixels higher than 800 and the client will crash if you so much as even glance at another program.

Fortunately, modders have come to the rescue with a tool called Windower that allows for modern

GET A JOB

Take a look at some of FFXI's most unique classes



BEASTMASTER

This job is for players that don't mind going it alone. Beastmasters can charm monsters and use them in combat.



BLUE MAGE

The Blue Mages are unique in that they don't learn spells automatically but earn them by defeating monsters.



DANCER

If you've ever punch-danced your feelings, the Dancer is the job for you. They can heal allies and weaken enemies.

resolutions and graphics options as well as a host of addons and mods to make in-game tasks easier. It's an incredible godsend.

TAKIN' IT SLOW

I spent more than two hours that first night just getting everything set up, reading guides, and installing addons before I actually started playing. But even when I was ready for some adventuring, *Final Fantasy XI* likes to start slow. A beginner's guide I found first had me tour around the major districts of Windhurst clicking on teleportation points and joining various crafting guilds for an initial boost of experience points and currency that I could use to buy some decent armour.

Everything in *Final Fantasy XI* takes an enormous amount of time, but that's actually something I like about it. Modern MMOs are too eager to please, too afraid you might play something else so they try to make everything as frictionless as possible. But *Final Fantasy XI* doesn't give a damn. It'll make you spend two minutes walking back and forth between a pair of quest givers half a dozen times. It'll make every



BENEATH THAT THICK CRUST OF ABSOLUTE BULLSHIT IS A GENUINELY INNOVATIVE MMO

interaction, like simply trading items with another player, require twice as many button presses than is reasonable. It's almost cruel.

But I also know that this was an enormously complicated game that Square Enix admirably tried to make playable with just a controller, so I'm willing to forgive it. And it's not like *Final Fantasy XI* doesn't have its charms either. Beneath that thick crust of absolute bullshit is a genuinely innovative MMO. And when I finally got out into the field and started killing monsters, I began feeling that familiar pull. That feeling of being sucked into the world and excited by its mysteries.

The job system, for example, remains one of *Final Fantasy XI*'s greatest triumphs. Instead of needing to make a new character for each job (the equivalent of a class), I can just switch on the fly and level a different job instead. *Final Fantasy XIV*

iterated on the idea, but *Final Fantasy XI*'s execution of it is still unrivalled. There's 22 jobs to unlock and level, each one offering a distinct playstyle. And after reaching a certain level you can take on a secondary job, giving you access to even more abilities to augment your primary ones. It's MMO theory-crafting at its finest.

AT A CROSSROADS

In the few hours I spent exploring Vana'diel, I started to feel myself acclimate to the slower pace. The lack of modern conveniences, like fast travel, and the awful control scheme are jarring at first. But there is a distinct appeal to playing a game that forces me to adapt to it instead of the other way around.

It's like selling all your belongings and living out in the woods, off the grid. At first the change seems hellish, but then you start to settle in and appreciate the little things – the catchy music, the subtle rhythm of combat, the rush of levelling up.

The only thing that's missing is other people. Though much of *Final Fantasy XI* remains unchanged, one major new feature is that players can now summon their own party of

NPCs to help them in combat. Unlike other MMOs, *Final Fantasy XI* was designed so combat almost always required a party of players.

It's one of the reasons *Final Fantasy XI* was such a social experience. But as its popularity has waned and almost everyone has moved on, Square Enix has had to make concessions to give newcomers like me a chance.

Each level used to be a hard-fought achievement, but now I can just summon my party of NPCs and quickly grind through a dozen levels in a few hours. Alone.

Though I understand why it had to happen, it's a reality that makes me uncomfortable. So much of what I loved about *Final Fantasy XI* was the social dynamics, but now the only evidence I have that I'm not alone is the constant barrage of messages from people trying to sell items.

I'm not sure whether I'll continue playing. A part of me is already invested in the journey to reach max level for the first time and do things that childhood me only dreamed of. But if those achievements are earned alone – if I'm the only one fighting and celebrating – is it worth it? ■



WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

GAMING WITH MY DAD

It all started with *Duke
Nukem 3D*. By Joanna Nelius



RIGHT: Only '90s kids will remember this.



My dad was the kind of man who would let me be in the room with him while he watched TV if I didn't breathe too heavily. If I asked a question, he'd ignore me. If I giggled, he'd tell me to shut up. It wasn't what I called bonding time, but he was the reason I fell in love with videogames at a young age. When I wasn't watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as he snored loudly on the couch, I was stood silently next to him as he played 'kid-appropriate' games like *Leisure Suit Larry* and *Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist* until my mum told me to get ready for bed.

Oh sure, I had a few actual age-appropriate games that I played to help me improve my sub-par math skills, but no game enamoured me more than watching my dad play *Duke Nukem 3D*, a game about a roided-out protagonist with a buzzcut who kicks ass and would chew bubble gum if he had any. That was the game my dad and I bonded over more than anything else when he was alive. Now, the parental lock was on the whole time, so I never saw the excess gore and strippers flashing their boobs in dimly lit bars as a child, but that game was the reason we bonded at all.

It was the first FPS he brought home. Moving through a 3D space like that for the first time was entrancing for us both. I memorised how he pressed the keys, the way he moved around the map. Every secret door. Every ammo location. Every enemy spawn. I even memorised every time he would switch weapons, whether it was to conserve ammo or take out a wild pack of pig cops. I memorised all these things for dozens of levels: take a step back,

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
January 29, 1996

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

OUR REVIEW
93%

LINK
dukenukem.com

DUKE TALK

References I 100% got as a child

"HAIL TO THE KING, BABY!"

"WE MEET AGAIN, DOCTOR JONES."



"BLOW IT OUT YOUR ASS!"

"BORN TO BE WILD."

"GO AHEAD. MAKE MY DAY."

grab a pistol, shoot the yellow barrels by the ventilation shaft, drop down. Immediately turn to the right, shoot an assault trooper. Jump on the billboard ledge behind you, grab the rocket launcher and then blow out the side wall to the theatre's ticket booth at the end of the street.

FAMILY SECRETS

I ended up memorising my dad's gameplay so thoroughly that when he

"How'd you get there?" he asked. I turned, smiled, then restarted from the beginning of Toxic Dump to show him how to get to the secret exit. Now he was silently watching me play. For the first time he was seeing how fast I could go through each level, and all the secret places I discovered without the help of a guidebook or him. When I punched the button at the secret exit and loaded into Launch Facility, I paused the game to look at my dad, who simply nodded and said, "Interesting. Have you seen the zoo level?"

I shook my head, then my dad showed me how to get into the demo level, which was basically multiple cages filled with enemies. He directed me to the end, to a cage packed with Battlelords, and told me to open it. They all rushed out towards me, screeching and firing their chainguns. My dad and I both shouted and laughed at the screen as I frantically tried to take out one before the rest left me in a bloody heap. "Try it again like this," my dad said, giving me tips on where to aim and what weapons to use.

For many years after that my dad would stop and watch me play a videogame if he happened to pass through the family room. He didn't always ask me questions about the game, but he cared enough to stop what he was doing to see what I was playing. ■

HE WAS THE REASON I FELL IN LOVE WITH VIDEOGAMES AT A YOUNG AGE

finally decided to give me a turn at the keyboard, not only did I start beating his best times, but I started finding secret places he hadn't yet. After about a month or so of us playing *Duke Nukem 3D*, my dad brought home the official guidebook, a massive 318-page 'bible' of every cheat, secret location, map, and strategy. It was after school on a Friday, and my dad jetted out of work early to pick up the guidebook, but when he got home, I was already on his computer, blasting my way through the secret Launch Facility level. He was annoyed with me at first, but then he realised he didn't recognise the level I was playing.



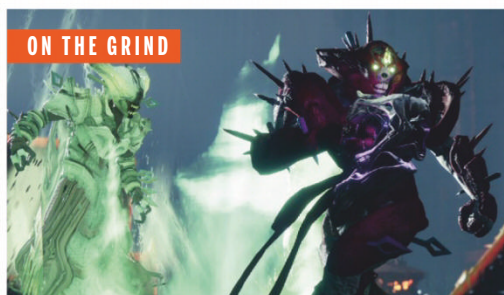
LEFT: It all looked mind-blowingly modern at the time.



TIM CLARK



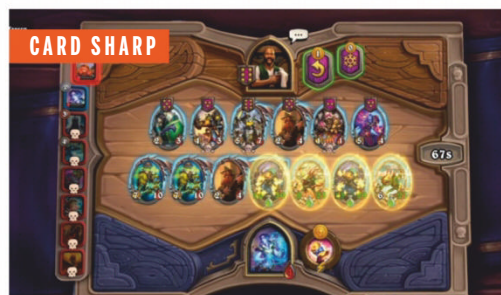
I'm old enough to remember playing *Elite* on the BBC. I'm also nominally in charge so not sure how Robin has tricked me into writing this on a Friday afternoon. He's now fired.



DESTINY 2

bungie.net/7/en/Destiny/Shadowkeep

➔ Real talk: if we were being honest all eight entries should be *Destiny 2*. What sickness brings me back night after night? It's a combination of the slick weapon feel and the fizzy space magic. Which still doesn't explain why I sunk 2,500 hours before the swap from Battle.net to Steam. Note: this is a cry for help.



HEARTHSTONE

playhearthstone.com

➔ My other main timesink is Blizzard's enraging CCG. As you read this the latest expansion, *Descent of Dragons*, will be a month old. It looks packed with hilariously overpowered cards, but whether that new hotness will be enough to draw me back from *Battlegrounds*, the addictive *Auto Chess* knockoff, is less certain.



CONTROL

controlgame.com

➔ Is it obligatory to include *Control*? It should be. I'm stalled halfway through, undone by an unresolved microstutter that was giving me anxiety, but Remedy's shooter was easily 2019's most stylish game, channelling weird fiction from X-Files, through David Lynch to Mark Z Danielewski's *House of Leaves*.



INSIDE

playdead.com/games/inside

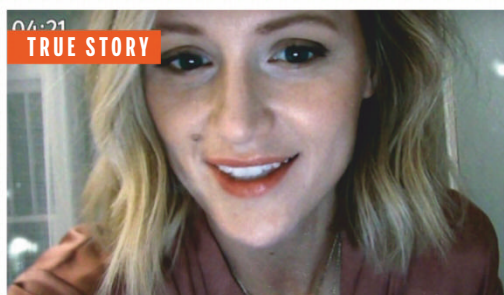
➔ Speaking of spooky, I'm including *Inside* because I still think about it all the time. Set against a backdrop of monochromatic totalitarianism, it's nominally a platform-puzzle hybrid. More accurately: it's Kafka does body horror. Best consumed in a single sitting, be warned that the final image on the beach will haunt you.



TWO POINT HOSPITAL

twopointhospital.com

➔ I love this despite being terrible at micromanaging its array of cartoon maladies and ballooning balance sheet. (Bad news for both the rest of the PC Gamer team and my paymasters.) My sister, in stark contrast, has five-starred every hospital in the game. It helps that she's a qualified actuary.



TELLING LIES

tellingliesgame.com

➔ I'm saving this to play over Christmas with my other half, PC hooked up to the TV and a high end cheeseboard on hand. We were both big fans of *Her Story*, and have also played a lot of the other less lauded FMV detective fare, like *Late Shift* and the frankly bizarre *Contradiction – Spot the Liar!*.



RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

rockstargames.com/reddeadredemption2

➔ My other big 'holiday' game is Rockstar's none-more-thicc old west epic. I waited to play *RDR2* on PC because honestly the console controls were in desperate need of remapping (unless you want to deal with the outcome of shooting NPCs mid-conversation by accident). Looks sensational on a 2080 too.



XCOM 2: WAR OF THE CHOSEN

xcom.com/war-of-the-chosen

➔ I haven't had a chance to sample *Phoenix Point* yet, so this is my turn-based strategy choice for now. *War of the Chosen* remains the gold standard when it comes to integrated DLC too. The way your alien nemeses are handled made them feel like despicable bastards, and their unique loot is great.



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0/5

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0/2

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BEARDED
REVIEWER SKIN



LEVEL 2

OMEGA FIRE
APOCALYPSE NX37
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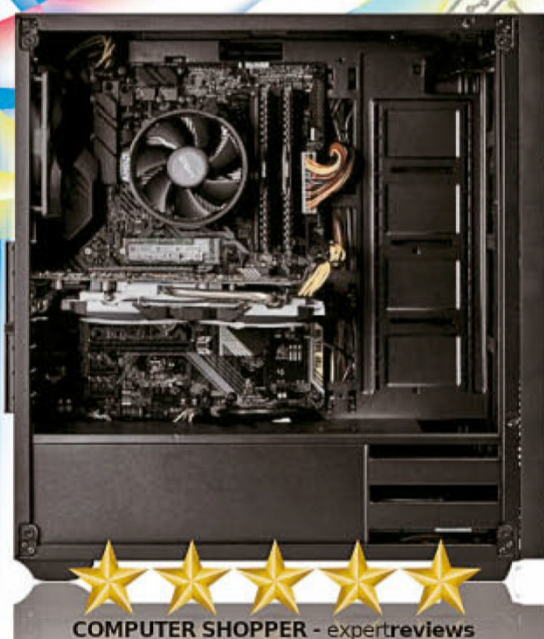
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